

December 1916...

Christmas is a time traditionally spent with loved ones, but there will undoubtedly be those who shall not make it home. Fred Norton, Percy Wicks and Albert Steggles are likely to see Christmas from a hospital bed, having been recently wounded. Miss Neep volunteered to be a nurse, so she will likely be caring for the wounded at Newmarket hospital. But what of those people who have no family to be with? What of their Christmas?

Herbert 'Kruger' Thompson may only be aged fourteen, but he has already spent more time breaking rules than going to school. Some say he lacks the influence of a father figure because his mother, despite having two children, never married and the family are virtually destitute. Three years ago Brandon magistrates had seen enough of Kruger, despite him only being aged eleven, so they removed him from the town and compelled him to grow up in an Industrial School. It was hoped the strict discipline would instil decent morals, as well as a desire to read and write, however this was not the case because the school had to constantly punish him for one thing or another. Once Kruger reached school-leaving age he was no longer compelled to stay there, so in August he returned to Brandon. There was some hope that he might turn things around after getting a job as an errand boy, but last night, Tuesday 5th December, at about 8.30pm, he slipped into old habits. Parked up at the railway station was a motorcar belonging to William Cowlishall of Methwold. Cowlishall had only left his car unattended for a short while, but in that time a silver plated carriage watch, valued at ten shillings, was stolen from inside the vehicle. He reported the theft, and gave descriptions of four lads seen walking near the car, to Inspector Frederick Mobbs of Brandon's Police.

Today Inspector Mobbs sets out to find the culprits. One description bears a resemblance to Kruger, and another sounds like fifteen-year-old Ernest Edwards. Mobbs visits Edwards while the lad is working at the Maltings by the bridge. Edwards appears sheepish when Mobbs mentions the stolen watch, which heightens the policeman's suspicions. Mobbs requests to see the lad's coat, to which Edwards indicates it is hanging up. Mobbs walks over, checks the pockets and pulls out a watch. This is the stolen property! Edwards spills the beans and tells the policeman that Kruger sold him the watch for two shillings. Mobbs sets off to find the other three suspects, taking Edwards with him. Now, with all suspects assembled – Edwards, Kruger, Alfred Ashley and James Wolsey; Mobbs relays the story as he understands it so far.

Ashley is first to break ranks and accuses Kruger of stealing the watch. Edwards jumps in and does likewise. With Kruger's past history and two eyewitnesses testifying against him, Mobbs has enough evidence to charge Kruger. Kruger, senses the game is up and comes clean, *"I will tell you the truth, Mr Mobbs. I did steal it, and I intend to steal until I am sent away again. You know I have got no home and I hope you will ask the magistrates to send me away."*

This Christmas will be Kruger's last in Brandon for a long time because the magistrates will again exile him from Brandon. This time he is to serve five years in a Reform School. Beyond that, who knows how Kruger's life will play out?