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## Can you hear me?

by Garf Collins

“Can you hear me Bert. Can you hear me?” Walter shouted as he lay behind a wall in Colenso. The scream of shells and the huge ‘crump’ and explosion as they landed shook the ground beneath them and threw up debris which threatened them again as it fell to earth. He was relieved to see Bert sliding from behind a pile of rubble.

“Yeh. I’m still with you Walt. Dunno what we’re supposed to do here. Only a few of us got through and look down there. What do they think they are doing forcing the poor sods to try to cross the river right under the Boer’s noses? With those Mauser rifles they’re cutting our men down like they’re scything corn”

“The idiot generals pushed our big guns up ahead of us right in the range of the Boers. I don’t know how we managed to take the village without their help. Looks like they ran out of shells so they’ve left the guns and taken shelter. What a bloody mess. The Generals have no idea of how to deal with the Boers. They’re too good with those rifles and they can reload in seconds. I tell you Bert they make us look like a load of amateurs.”

“Dead right Walt. I don’t think we can last out. The shells keep coming in. They’re far too bloody accurate for my liking. Wish we’d never volunteered for this game. I’d much rather be back at the mill”

“Only two weeks to Christmas. Not that there’s much chance we’ll be back home for that. That was a near one,” Walter shouted as a sniper’s bullet ricocheted off the building behind them. There was an anguished cry close by. Walter saw that yet another of their company had been hit. He lay back against a wall clutching his shoulder with blood oozing through his khaki uniform.

An officer covered in dust crawled up to them, "General Hildyard's ordered us to retreat. The reinforcements are not going to get here. A few of you need to stay in Colenso and fight while the rest retreat. Also we need volunteers to help rescue the guns. We need to haul them out with teams of horses"

"I'll go," Walter shouted back, "anything's better than hanging around here. You Bert?"

"Not me. I'm no good with horses. I'll stay and hold out as long as we can but what about him?"

"If he can't walk out he'll have to take his chance when they take the village. There's no way I can get stretcher bearers up here. Let's get going!"

Joseph arrived at the Queen St Mill on January 8<sup>th</sup> at 7am. He went straight to the loom which had broken down. Already there was a cacophony from the hundreds of looms in the factory. It was almost a relief to him that he couldn't hear well after years in that din. There was the regular thump and sigh of the steam engine turning the rattling overhead shafts. The forest of leather belts coming down from the shafts, slapped as they drove the looms. But far worse was the crashing of thousands of shuttles hurling the cotton thread backwards and forwards across the weft of the cloth. He looked down the rows of machines being tended by the young girls who had just started their 12 hour shifts. "It's no life for those poor girls," he murmured. "If we have granddaughters I'll never let them come in here. They'd be old before they're 30. They can't even talk in this terrible noise except by lip reading"

He thought about his son Walter and William's son Bert who had gone out to South Africa to fight in the Second Boer War. Perhaps the hell their boys had chosen was better than this home grown version. "At least it's in the open air and if they dodge the bullets they'll be better off. I'm not surprised that they gave up stoking the boilers for 12 hours a day," he thought. But he was puzzled as to why the might of the British Army with volunteers from around the Empire were having so much trouble with a bunch of farmers.

Returning to his task he started to disassemble the loom so he could replace the broken beam. Suddenly there was a scream and looking round he saw a girl writhing on the concrete floor clutching her face. One of the shuttles had flown off a machine and struck her. Its pointed end had buried itself deep into her cheek. As she clutched it to try to remove it, her shrieks were dampened by the blood which gurgled in her throat. Joseph shouted to a girl to call for help and knelt beside the victim trying his best to comfort her until she could be taken to the local hospital.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder, "The manager wants to see you. He says it's urgent."

"Right I'll have to go. Would you stay by this poor girl until help arrives?"

Joseph walked through the hundreds of clattering machines trying to think what was up. Was he going to be blamed for the faulty loom? As he walked into the office he was alarmed to see by the manager's face something was badly wrong. Raising his voice above the noise of the mill, the manager told Joseph,

“Your wife came just now with a letter she had received from a Sergeant Black in your son’s platoon. I’m very sorry to tell you that your Walter was killed while in a party trying to rescue some heavy guns. They succeeded in getting two out but he was killed as they went back for a third. Apparently, he committed himself heroically. He also said in the letter to tell William his son Bert was taken prisoner fighting a rearguard action on the retreat from the village they had been occupying.”

Emerging from the office in a daze, Joseph sat down on the chair by the door covering his head with his hands. Some time later William came past and stooping by Joseph shouted, “Can you hear me Joseph. Can you hear me?” but Joseph gave no sign of recognition as the tears ran through his fingers onto his soiled overalls.