'I've been doin' considerable thinkin' since I've been lyin' here,' he went on. 'War's a terrible thing, a cruel thing, with a lot of sufferin' for folks that ain't in any ways to blame—the women, the old folks, and the little children.' His voice grew tender. 'Don't seem right, somehow. Of course, a man's got to do his duty. Now I could no more help enlistin' than I can help breathin', so that's no credit to me. When the call come, I just left pa to run the farm and look after Adelaide and little Mary. Then there's them on the other side, the fellers that's goin' to be beat, sure. They're such plucky fighters. I believe I'm right, and I'd fight 'em to a finish, but they don't see it that way, and it is kind of hard on 'em, ain't it, now?'

'That's the hard part of it,' said the nurse gently. 'The victory of one always means the defeat of the other.' Something in Ransom's unspoken sympathy led her to open her heart. 'Father's with Thomas in Tennessee. One brother's in the navy, and the youngest'—her voice broke—'is with Lee in Virginia. We were always great chums, Bob and I. He was father's favorite, too. It was hard for father.'

She was silent; then, as her eyes met Ransom's direct look of gentle compassion, she went on almost as if the words were forced from her:

'And a man of whom I was very fond died at Shiloh, Ransom.' Her voice lapsed into silence.

The bearded soldier reached out his thin hand and stroked the girl's sleeve. 'I mistrusted you had a story, but I never dreamed it was like that. You're a brave little woman,' he said tenderly, 'way down here lookin' after us battered veterans.'

Miss Eliot smiled through her tears.

'Oh, I couldn't help it, Ransom, any more than I can help breathing, so you see it's no credit to me.'

Day followed day in the cool old mansion over which fluttered the Stars and Stripes. At intervals came letters, official and unofficial, bulky documents with imposing government seals, communications for the commandant of the fort, papers galore; but among them all, Ransom's papers were not.

When the next transport sailed without him, he bade a cheerful adieu to the men going north. 'I'm right down glad for you boys,' he said to a soldier who had come to say good-bye. 'It won't be long now before I'll be a'followin' you.'

'That's right, Ransom,' said the man heartily. 'Good-bye, old fellow, and good luck!'

Outside the room he shook his head gravely. 'That cough is pretty serious. It's too bad he isn't going up on this boat. There's so much confounded red tape in these government affairs a man could die fifty times before they get round to him.'

The next day was Sunday, and as an especial treat Ransom was taken out on the verandah for a few hours.

'I'm a-pickin' up right along,' he said to the nurse. 'Perhaps it's just as well I couldn't go with the transport. Next time I'll be a good deal stronger.' He looked out across the landscape with wistful eyes. 'You ain't ever seen the pictures of my wife and little girl, have you?'

Miss Eliot shook her head, whereat Ransom reached his hand into his breast pocket, and drew out a little carved wooden case, which he opened with much care, disclosing two daguerreotypes.

From one compartment looked the face of a woman, with broad brow, plain-banded hair, and firm yet sweet mouth. The eyes had a strangely direct gaze, and the entire countenance bore the stamp of strength and sincerity. Through the almost austere reserve shone a divine tenderness. The nurse instinctively recognised one of those rare natures which are not baffled by difficulties, but which persevere through suffering, even through defeat, to final triumph.

'Adelaide was teachin' in our district when I married her,' said Ransom. 'I never quite see how she came to take me. I was older, and hadnt' had her schoolin', and I ain't much to look at; but she always allowed she was satisfied, and we've been mighty happy together.' There was a ring of pride in Ransom's voice.

The other picture was that of a little girl, four years old. Her parted hair hung in short curls each side a round, serious little face. The big eyes had a questioning look, and the lips were slightly parted. The low-cut frock and short sleeves left uncovered a beautiful neck and chubby, dimpled arms.

The nurse gave a cry of delight. 'The quaint little darling!' she exclaimed. 'I'd just like to give her a good hug!'

'I guess maybe I'd better go in now, Miss Eliot.'

'Tired, Ransom?' she said gently.

'Guess I am a little mite,' he said reluctantly. 'When I git up home now—' A severe fit of coughing interrupted the last sentence.

In the hall a few minutes later she encountered the old doctor. He was a tall man, with bushy eyebrows and a pair of keen eyes.

Miss Eliot looked him squarely in the eye. 'What are Ransom's chances?'

The old doctor regarded her gravely.

'Unless his papers come so that we can start him off on the next transport Ransom's chances are practically nothing. I've written to Washington, and Commandant Haskell's written, and nothing's been heard. There you have it.'

Miss Eliot's lips set themselves in firm lines. 'I'm going to write,' she said, 'but I'm going to write to Adelaide.'

'Who's Adelaide?' queried the old doctor curiously.

'Adelaide is Ransom's wife. I believe if any one can get those papers, she can.'

'There's a tug going up to-morrow,' he said. 'Your scheme may not work, but it's worth trying.'

That night the nurse wrote the letter, and her whole heart went into it.

The days went slowly by. Ransom continued sweet-tempered and cheerful, although as he grew weaker, he became daily a little more quiet.

Just when he stopped asking for his papers it would be hard to say, but that time did at last come. On those occasions when the mail was brought in he would watch wistfully, but the words did not pass his lips. Only his hollow eyes questioned. Miss Eliot grew to dread those moments. From her own letter to Adelaide she had not heard.

So, in the process of time, came the day for the second transport to sail. That morning Miss Eliot stood on the broad porch, watching the busy scene at the dock. Her face was sad. 'This afternoon,' she found herself saying, 'the boat will go, and Ransom's chance will go with it.'

As she paused on the threshold, she noticed idly, far out in the harbor, a gunboat steaming toward the shore.

Slowly she climbed the stairs to Ransom's room. As she entered, he greeted her with his accustomed cheerfulness. It was as if he guessed her thoughts, and was trying to make it easy for her.

'It's a fine day,' he said.

'Yes, Ransom.'

'It's this afternoon the boat sails, ain't it, Miss Eliot?'

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

Then, at last, Ransom broke the reticence of weeks.

'I've been sort of thinkin',' he said slowly, 'and I guess it ain't goin' to be my luck to get home. It looks pretty much as if my papers was a-comin' from another world.

'Don't you feel so bad about it, Miss Eliot,' he said comfortingly, as he noted the expression on her face. 'I'm real contented. I ain't denyin' it was kind of hard at first, when I began to realise how things was goin', but I'm feelin' more reconciled now. If I had it to do over, I wouldn't do no different. War does cost, and if I'm to be a part of the price, so to speak, I'm willing to pay my share. Only—I just would like to see Adelaide and little Mary again.'

There was yearning unutterable in the soldier's voice.

'If I ain't here when my papers come, Miss Eliot, I'd kind of like to have Adelaide have 'em, and there's a few things—'