THE TURN OF THE FLOOD: A STORY: BY
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LIZABETH ALLEN had her first glimpse of the
situation before she had been a week in her son’s
house. What had happened was simple enough, but
it gave her food for thought. Luke was sitting in
his mother’s room when Ada came in. Luke’s
back was toward the door and he did not turn his
head at his wife’s approach. When she put her
hand on his shoulder and said:

“Luke,” in a low tone,—“Well, Ada,” he replied, and there
was a perceptible tinge of resignation in his voice, the voice of a
man who says, “Well, I’m in for it now.”

At that, without another word, Ada fled from the room like a
whirlwind. That the door didn’t slam behind her was a tribute to her
early upbringings;

Luke Allen glanced at his mother, shrugging his shoulders. Mrs.
Allen asked succinctly:

“What ails Ada?”

“I wish you’d tell me what ‘ails Ada,’” he burst out impatiently.
“I don’t pretend to understand women.” Then he added dryly,
“Ada has a great many ‘feelings,’ you know—any amount of them.”

“Do you mean her feelings are hurt?” his mother asked. She
was very much bewildered. Never in her well-ordered life had she
fled whirlwind-like from any room, nor could the circumstances have
arisen to make her act in this way. To her question her son answered
again.

“Oh, I suppose so.” His tone was weary; the boyish blitheness
which made him so charming died out. Mrs. Allen’s serene brow
wrinkled itself into a perplexed little frown.

“I am afraid, my son, that you and Ada are not as happy as I
should like to see you.”

“Oh, we jog along,” said Luke.

He rose in the same weary, lack-luster way. He knew so well
what would happen next. It was part of the emotional treadmill that
Ada should come to dinner as full of gaiety as a child. She was
dressed in a lovely pink gown, ruffled like a rose, its silken rustling
talking eloquently of parties.

“Where are we going tonight?” Luke asked, and let Ada read in
his eyes how very lovely she was.

“Toward the Tallent’s,” she answered, and shot him a look of sus-
picion, as if to surprise any latent unwillingness in him. He caught
the look, and his face fell, but when they drove off together, Luke’s blitheness had returned and Ada was in the best of high spirits. As Mrs. Allen saw them off, they seemed to her the incarnation of youth and gaiety, and she went to bed with the consoling picture of them, though still perplexed as to what the scene had been about.

Elizabeth Allen had always had an unspoken pride in Ada. She enjoyed watching the neighbors stare at Ada’s dresses, and at Ada herself, who was so incomparably more splendid than anyone else’s daughter-in-law. Not that she felt comfortable with Ada, for Ada was to the little, quiet lady larger than life; the intensity of her enthusiasms, her loud ringing gaiety, seemed to Mrs. Allen like some elemental quality which might at any moment sweep away all the familiar landmarks.

The first week had begun her life of surprises. Breakfast had been the first.

“Doesn’t Ada come down?” she asked.

“Never!” Luke had replied, with a satisfaction in his emphasis which foreshadowed their attitude toward each other.

Breakfast became a pleasant hour to mother and son. Soon Luke formed the habit of going to his mother’s room when he came home from business. His mother would greet him with a gentle, “Have you had a satisfactory day, my son?” and further made no demand upon him. They talked very little together, for between them was always the shadow of Luke’s and Ada’s last unpleasantness—and there always was a last unpleasantness. Between scenes, so to speak, Ada would be gay and gracious, while Luke unbent also; but like a careful mariner in strange waters, he was never quite at his ease. He was perpetually on the watch for shoals, his ear quick for the sound of breakers, and often fancying he heard them when there were none. Ada would ask, for instance, in all candor:

“You can’t come with me tonight, can you?”

“I can’t, as you know,” Luke would reply, and then add gratuitously, “And I would be glad if you wouldn’t make a scene about it.”

“There is trouble and to spare in this house” was Mrs. Allen’s summing up of her first days under her son’s roof. “What irritated Luke so, and why were Ada’s feelings hurt?” was what she asked herself, after one of Ada’s furious exits, as Luke walked the floor.

The walking of floors and the flying from rooms was only the beginning. They soon became so used to her quiet presence that by the time she had completed her first month with them, they were morally, so to speak, in their shirt-sleeves, their stocking-feet on the table.
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As they quarreled at their ease before her, Mrs. Allen would sit very quiet, her heart beating like a trip-hammer. Each storm left her in fear of a worse; she was fully prepared for the cyclone. Yet, when it came at last, she was as shaken as if she had never expected such a thing. It began in a trivial way, as did all their storms. Luke said:

“Oh, I suppose I’ve got to go tonight—though I’d give a dollar to stay home.”

Ada replied quickly:—“You needn’t go if you don’t want to.”

What was there in that to warn one the cyclone was coming?

“Why can’t you go without me?” Luke asked. At that Ada drooped—she could droop like a sunstruck flower.

“For heaven’s sake, don’t cry!” Luke gave back, turning to his paper, “I shall go whether you do or not.”

It was when Luke actually went without Ada that the cyclone broke, for Ada burst into an abandon of weeping the like of which Mrs. Allen had never seen. It appalled her; she would have been glad to fly from it, but a certain awful fascination held her; besides, she didn’t dare to go, for it didn’t seem possible that anyone could give way to such grief without ill consequences. After a while, the fury of the storm abated, and died away with the suddenness of cyclonic storms, leaving behind the wreck of Ada. Her beautiful hair was disheveled into tragic strands, her eyes were puffed and swollen; there were dark red marks on her wrists, where she had dug her nails deep in.

“I wish I were like you,” she said, for Mrs. Allen had weathered the gale sitting quietly in her chair. She had fluttered over to Ada and had murmured timid comforting words which were as straws in the flood of Ada’s agony, and had fluttered back to her chair, in horrified silence, but outwardly unshaken.

“I suppose you think I’m an awful fool,” Ada said next.

Elizabeth Allen didn’t answer; she felt as if what she had passed through had carried all her words away.

“It isn’t, you know, just because Luke went without me,” Ada explained, in a matter-of-fact tone. “It’s because we’re—drifting away from each other.” And the little break in Ada’s voice touched Mrs. Allen more than all the tears she had shed.

“Oh, Luke’s so blind—blind—blind! He doesn’t see where we’re going! I can’t make him see. We’re losing each other, Luke and I; we’re losing each other!”

Ada rose to her feet, towering a tragic figure before the little woman.
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“You must have seen me trying. You must have seen me coming to him all affection, fairly offering my heart to him—and seen him turn away. And yet he cares for me—some. He isn’t all indifference to me—yet. Oh, it’s awful, awful to see the thing that makes life worth living go before your eyes, and try to help it and yet have it ebb from you like the tide!”

It was very sad; it was also very amazing, for of all the unsatisfactory explanations of the discord between Luke and Ada that Elizabeth Allen had inspected and then discarded as inadequate, she had never suspected for a moment that Ada’s abrupt exits, her tragic manners, were because she was attempting to keep Luke’s love. She turned it all over in her mind.

“I am sure Luke loves you very dearly,” was what she finally brought out.

“He’s letting me go; he’s letting me slide,” Ada insisted, forlornly. Her eyes were dry now, but desolation was in every bend of her lovely body; even the folds of her dress seemed to take on their wearer’s forsaken air. “He’d let me go alone, if I would; he’d let me go by myself—you saw that.”

“It has sometimes seemed, my dear, that Luke would enjoy going out with you all the more if you sometimes did go out alone,” Mrs. Allen ventured.

“You don’t know how men swarm around a woman who’s seen about without her husband,” Ada replied, simply. “If I once got the reputation of being unhappy, that would be—the end.”

They sat in silence for a while, each one brooding over her own thoughts, Mrs. Allen trying to understand in all its complications the society Ada had shown her—and shown her with such unconcern; one of Ada’s most upsetting traits was her way of bringing out appalling things with the same tranquillity with which she might remark that the day was fine.

Presently Ada took up her plaint. “And Luke won’t help me. Luke won’t see! I feel as if we were both in some swift-rushing stream that was bearing us away. We might fight it together, but if we let go each other’s hands, we’ll be drowned. So I grab hold of him and cling to him, but—it’s no use.”

Mrs. Allen was not skilled in the use of metaphor; it occurred to her however that people who fought too hard against drowning, drowned all the more quickly. Ada looked at her mother-in-law, and what she saw in the delicate, distressed face touched her.

“You poor dear!” she cried. “I’ve worried you awfully; I’m
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a beast. But anyway, you’ve seen enough before this, and I love Luke—"

She stopped, then for a moment Mrs. Allen looked into Ada’s heart and turned her eyes away ashamed, for in that moment she had seen how it was Ada loved Luke. It was a love which burned Ada and tortured her, an all-devouring flame that would give her no rest, nor could she in her turn give any peace to Luke.

It was soon after this that Mrs. Allen began to venture on timid words of counsel. When Luke broke out:

“She’s got to stop these scenes, you know! I can’t stand them; no man could!” Mrs. Allen answered, wistfully:

“She loves you very dearly, Luke. All she wants is your affection.”

“She’s a queer way of showing it,” he answered, with his weary bitterness. “Why don’t she leave me alone sometimes? I love her too. I’m very fond of Ada; but a man’s got to be left alone sometimes—and by God, I’m going to be! I won’t stand it!”

And when Mrs. Allen suggested mildly to Ada after one of her volcanic explosions:

“Don’t you think, my dear, that one should choose one’s times and seasons with a busy man—”

“Oh, I’m not politic,” Ada would answer, recklessly. “People in pain seldom are. It’s when I’m hurt that I cry out. When you love people so terribly you can’t be tactful.”

There were two things that no one could dispute. One was that Ada did love her husband “terribly,” as she said, and the other was that she suffered; she didn’t make scenes out of shear unreasonable wantonness. Rather, they were wrung from her by her pain, and deep in Elizabeth Allen a responsive chord stirred. She remembered how long ago her husband failed her, how the rainbow colored dreams she had dreamed as a young woman turned to gray. She had made her own timid, ineffectual attempts to make her dreams come true; after a while she had stopped dreaming, and had given her dreams to her son instead, and had waked up one morning a sedate married woman, happy as another. But Ada had no one else on whom to spend her affection, no one to think of but Luke.

Elizabeth Allen watched them, an agonized spectator of the battle, but while they had days when they harked back to their first happiness, Mrs. Allen watched for the storm. And the storm never failed her, though she saw its nature was changing. Ada was more reckless, her gaiety on an ever higher key, her anger fiercer, while Luke’s nerves were worn to breaking.
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"Things can’t go on as they have," Mrs. Allen told herself. There would be some sort of a change, she was sure, some final storm. Nor was she mistaken. When it came, she heard its fury far off. It was followed by three days of cloudy silence, when Mrs. Allen saw neither Ada nor Luke but for a few meaningless minutes.

The heavy hours dragged on, but neither of them came to her. In the stress of their own affair they forgot her. The strain made her ill. It was in her bed she heard of what had happened.

"I simply told Ada she would have to control herself better in the future," was Luke’s version. "I told her that I could not go out with her every night. My health won’t stand it. My business suffers."

"What did she say to that?" his mother asked him.

"Oh, she made a row at first," he answered. "I expected that; but afterward she became reasonable—surprisingly reasonable for Ada. I ought to have taken a stand sooner."

Mrs. Allen feared this reasonableness of Ada’s, from whom she soon learned the other side.

"I don’t know whether Luke’s told you or not," Ada said, "what he’s done. He’s practically cut me adrift. He’s through with me. You see, I’ve quite tired him out," she explained—there was no bitterness in her tone, only grief—"So I give up, too; but always, whatever happens, remember I stayed by him till he turned me out."

"What do you suppose will happen?" Mrs. Allen quavered.

"I don’t know," Ada returned, her tragic eyes fixed on vacancy. Then she rose and kissed her mother-in-law.

"I’ll do my best," she said. "I’ll do my very best—for your sake as well as Luke’s. You’re an angel. There are lots of women in your position who would blame me."

Poor Elizabeth Allen was not seeking to place blame. Disaster of some sort threatened, and her mind was busy as to how this might be averted, busy in wondering what it was that was happening to Ada, who since the night Luke had “taken his stand” had been exemplary.

Luke was very much pleased.

"I should have acted much sooner," he told his mother. Of his own accord, he began to be more expansive with Ada.

"Oh, if he prefers me like this," Ada told Mrs. Allen, "he can have me!"

Mrs. Allen had always been a frail woman, and now she became a shadow, so fast had she fed herself into the furnace of their lives. Even Luke noticed it, and called in a doctor, who said that she was

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run down and gave her a tonic. But tonics were of very little account beside what Mrs. Allen now had to face. The catastrophe she had so dreaded began to take form.

Its form was, as from the first she had imagined it would be, that of a young man. He was tall, dark, intense, and he kept his eager eyes ostentatiously on Ada. Ada ignored him, snubbed him, flattered him, petted him, and ignored him again. But that was not the significant part of it to Mrs. Allen. She had seen Ada ring the changes of her moods with a series of men. In Ada’s world Mrs. Allen had realized early in her stay the perpetual presence of young men was part of the social game. This young man, however, was different from the others. Neither Ada’s rudeness nor her indifference moved him, for Ada gave her admirers the full broadside of her moods; not Luke himself got them less veiled. If one couldn’t live at Ada’s emotional pace, one could go. Ada had never concealed anything in her life, and now, far from concealing her friend, an enemy might have said she flaunted him. Luke and his mother ignored the situation as long as they could. Luke had from the first treated Ada’s friends with the good-natured tolerance a large boy accords a small one. It was a very becoming attitude, but at present hardly an adequate one, as Mrs. Allen told her son as the moment came when it could no longer be ignored.

“A man ought to protect his young wife,” was how she put it.


“I’d like you to suggest how I’m to go about ‘protecting’ Ada.”

“You trust Ada, don’t you?”

“She’d better let me trust her!” replied Luke, grimly.

“I’ve sometimes thought,” his mother went on, and no one would have suspected the anguish under her calm manner, “I’ve sometimes thought Ada didn’t want you to trust her quite so much.”

“Oh, I don’t know what Ada wants,” Luke broke out, “but I’ll tell you what she won’t get—and that’s a scene from me. I do trust Ada, I trust her absolutely—but she can make her mind up to the fact that I’m not going to play jealous husband.”

Mrs. Allen could only repeat, “I think a man owes it to himself to look after his wife.”

“I think he owes it to himself not to be a fool—no matter what his wife is!” Luke replied. “Ada’s making a fool of herself. She’ll stop—or she won’t.”

At the grimness of his tone, Mrs. Allen’s heart stopped beating, then raced on at full speed.
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"And you won't lift your finger?" she asked, feebly.

"Ada's always made a great fuss about how much she cares for me," he answered, irrelevantly. "Let her prove it, then. I've borne a good deal from Ada, but she needn't try me too far!"

"Do you mean you'll—cast her off?" Ada's tragic phrase came of itself to Mrs. Allen's lips.

"It seems to me that it's Ada who 'casts me off,'" her son replied.

As time went on, Ada brought up the subject of what Mrs. Allen termed, for want of a better word, "the state of things," at first tentatively and then with more and more frankness.

"You see now, don't you?" she told her mother-in-law, "that what I said at first is quite true? Luke's through with me."

"I don't think, my dear," Mrs. Allen replied, mildly, "that you have a right to say that."

"I call shoving your wife—fairly shoving her down other men's throats, being through with her," Ada lucidly explained her position. "If Luke were prepared to play the part of complaisant husband, he couldn't shut his eyes more firmly—"

"Luke trusts you, Ada," Mrs. Allen interrupted, "and you know the part of 'complaisant husband,' as you call it, is one which Luke could never play."

"Oh, I know that," Ada laughed, bitterly. "He'll go on what he calls 'trusting me' until he can't trust me any longer; then he'll throw me over—unless I save him the trouble."

"Do you really mean that you think Luke will ever have cause not to trust you?" Mrs. Allen inquired, anxiously.

"I can't live this way forever," Ada asserted.

"But you love Luke, Ada!" Mrs. Allen cried. "You know you love him!"

"I don't know anything else all day and all night," Ada replied, somberly. "That's the worst of it! That's the awful part of it! If I didn't love him, things would be simple enough. I've thought so often lately that if I cut myself off from him forever, perhaps I could endure life better."

Mrs. Allen was silent. She sat in her customary tranquil pose, a little troubled frown her only sign of disturbance. Ada was stretched out on the divan, abandon and despair in every fold of her elaborate white peignoir. After a moment of reflection, Mrs. Allen spoke.

"I suppose there are few women in this world who have all the love they want."
Ada raised herself abruptly, and her chin in her hand, stared at her mother-in-law with beautiful, tragic eyes.

"Do you mean all women in the world are hungry—as I am?" she demanded.

"Most women set great store on being cared for——" "Love" was a word that passed Mrs. Allen’s lips with difficulty.

"Did you ever feel that way?" Ada demanded again.

Mrs. Allen flushed delicately. It did not come easy to say such things. She hesitated a moment.

"As a young woman I did," she confessed at last. "But I got over it—I had Luke, you see—and in the end Luke’s father grew to depend on me. Women have to be patient in this world, Ada."

But at this Ada flamed out. "I’m not patient—I don’t want to be patient! A woman’s youth goes while she’s patient, and then there’s nothing left for her! No one will care for her then. I don’t want a life empty of love! And if Luke won’t care for me as I care for him, why the best thing would be for me to forget him!"

She rose partly from the divan and fixed Mrs. Allen with somber eyes; and as the older woman returned the gaze she knew that for herself Ada spoke the truth.


Ada’s laugh was dreary.

"He’s an odd way of showing it. Why does he let us go as we are?" She spoke as if the march of events was quite outside her control; and so, in a measure, they were, Mrs. Allen acknowledged.

"Luke won’t lift a finger—you’ll see," Ada finished.

"Oh, Ada!" cried Mrs. Allen. "Oh, my child! I’d give my life to help you!" The wish of her heart found utterance.

Ada put her hands on her mother-in-law’s shoulders, and looked down on her from her greater height.

"I believe you would," she said. "I believe you’d do just that! Well, I’ll do my best, but that won’t be much. When things get to the breaking point, they just break."

Disaster lay heavy in the air. Mrs. Allen began to watch Ada’s comings and goings. She prowled the house at night, waiting, a wan little ghost in a gray flannelette gown, for the tragedy. She would wait until one o’clock, two o’clock, three o’clock, for the clang of a carriage door and the fumble of the key in the lock, and Ada’s soft silken rustle as she came rapidly up the stairs. Then only would Mrs. Allen go to her rest. Often she would open the window and lean out, looking for the carriage.
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To do this, she had to leave her own room at the back of the house and make her way to an empty guest chamber. One night she was leaning out of the window, in an agony of expectation. A pre-sentiment of evil hung over her. She felt herself grow chilled in the cold air, but she couldn’t leave. She must stay there until the familiar carriage swung around the corner and Ada was home, safe for another day. So absorbed was she that she didn’t hear a footstep behind her, until a voice said: “What are you doing here?”

She turned, trembling with cold and fright, to find herself face to face with Luke.

“What are you doing here, mother?” he repeated. By the electric light which shone in from the street, she could see his face was pale and drawn.

“I’m—I’m waiting for Ada,” she faltered.

“Are you waiting for her to come, or for her to stay away?” he demanded. “What made you wait tonight?”


“Oh, you often wait, do you?” he said. “Perhaps you wait every night—as I wait. Do you? Answer me! Do you?”

He would have gone on, the flood-gates of his bitterness open at last; but—

“Hush!” his mother said, “Hush! What right have you to talk like that! You’ve only to raise your hand to make it come right. It’s your miserable pride; it’s your hardness. You’ve only to let her know that you’ve waited——”

She paused abruptly. “Hush!” she said again.

The door was closing, Ada’s foot was on the stairs; and Mrs. Allen, in her gray flannelette mother-hubbard, swayed to and fro like some absurd rag doll, and would have fallen but for her son.

Together they carried her to her bed. They didn’t speak until Luke explained grimly: “She was waiting for you to come back.”

At that Mrs. Allen opened her eyes and said feebly, her accusing eyes on her son: “He was waiting for you, too.” Then, after her supreme effort, she closed her eyes again, and it was the last coherent word she said for many days.

There followed a space of time that did not divide itself off into nights and days, and, through her fever, Mrs. Allen had the sensation of being taken care of. She fancied herself a little girl again, and a large, shining presence enfolded her in its caressing care. In her delirium, she called this presence “mother.” There were other people there too, men and women, but Mrs. Allen’s brain refused
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to untangle their personalities. She clung resolutely to that stronger one, that took care of her as her own mother had when she was a little girl, so many years ago. Then, as her consciousness came slowly to the surface again, the other personalities resolved themselves into a nurse and a doctor and Luke, hollow-eyed and haggard; little by little, her "mother" transformed herself into Ada. But though the vision of her mother had faded, there remained with Mrs. Allen the memory of incessant care, of long nights of watching.

She looked at Ada. Unlike Luke, she showed little trace of the strain she had been under. There was not nearly as much distress visible now as after one of her conflicts with Luke. There was, indeed, a high, shining serenity about her, as of a person who has a work to do, and who knows how to do it. How true Mrs. Allen’s instinct was, she could gather from the doctor, who turned to Ada with quiet admiration.

“You’ve pulled her through,” he said.

Ada’s large eyes rested on him in beautiful surprise.

"Of course I’ve pulled her through," she said. There was a hint of indignation at the doctor’s suggested alternative. "What," she seemed to demand, "do you think of me? Do you think that I’d let my mother die like that—die when I was here to prevent it?"

Her beauty shone on Elizabeth Allen like a reassuring star after a night of tempest. Vaguely, somewhere in the back of her brain Mrs. Allen noticed that Ada seemed steadier than she had ever yet seen her. She went over and slipped her hand into Luke’s. She did it almost absent-mindedly, as one takes a comrade’s arm. There was none of her old challenge in it; and as for Luke, he seemed grateful for this attention. They had fought Death shoulder to shoulder, Ada commanding officer, the captain of their forlorn hope, Luke under her command. Their greater anxiety had been a solvent of all their old bitterness. Weak and sick as Mrs. Allen was, one thing shone out so luminous that she could not but be aware of it, and it was the shifting of balance which had gone on between them all. During the time she had been in the vague country of sickness, on the borderland between life and death, momentous things had been happening between her children.

As the days wore on, she noticed, for instance, that it was Luke who sought out Ada tenderly, and asked her permission to spend time beside his mother. They had much silent intercourse, the mother and son, and the things that Luke had to tell her were not the things one can speak aloud. But it gave Mrs. Allen courage to
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approach Ada on the subject that occupied her mind so much. What she said summed up all her observations since she had come back to life. They were:

"You seem happier than I have ever seen you before."

"I am," Ada met her with promptness. "I've saved you," she explained with her customary lucidity, "out of the wreck of things that Luke and I between us so nearly made. And," she went on, "I am going to keep on saving you. You're going to be happy.

Mrs. Allen almost found herself fancying that Ada had added, "—whether anybody else is or not."

She put her arms around her mother-in-law's frail shoulders with almost savage passion. It was a gesture as of a mother. Mrs. Allen might indeed have been the little girl she fancied herself in her delirium, Ada's little child.

"You poor little thing!" Ada murmured, "don't worry about Luke and me ever again. You've seen for yourself everything's all right between us, all right for ever and ever."

She held her mother close for a moment. Then she went on superbly:

"Luke understands what a stiff-necked brute he was to let things go on as he did, when he cared so awfully. Think of his waiting up night after night!" A little clear flame blazed in Ada's eyes. "Waiting up night after night for me, and never letting me know he did it, and making you all that trouble! It was all so unnecessary!" she cried, "all our trouble! Why, if I'd known he waited up once, not anything would have happened. But it's his waiting and not letting me know—letting things get to such a pass, that's so hard to understand, when it's so easy to let people see when you care for them. But I've forgiven him, don't be afraid; we have made a clean sweep of it. And it was you made us. I don't for a moment mean I'm not to blame as much at Luke," Ada conceded with a large gesture. "I ought to have seen myself what was happening; I ought to have protected you, and both of us; but I was so wrapped up in Luke, you know."

Mrs. Allen thought over the things that Ada had put before her. "Do you mean," she said at last, "that you are less wrapped up in him now?" "I mean," Ada replied, "that I understand now that there is more in the world than just Luke and my love for him and his for me. There is you. Nobody," she repeated, "shall ever bother you again, nobody!"