

# The Lady Alicia

By H. F. W. Tatham

The Lady Alicia sat at the window of her great house and looked out over the wide prospect that lay beneath. As far as eye could reach all was hers—the garden with its terraces and flower-beds and lawns; the park dotted with tall trees and wandered over by herds of deer; the meadows where the great cattle grazed or lay ruminating by the water-side; the yellow cornlands, the woods just reddening under the touch of autumn, even the houses of the village half seen at the foot of the long slope of the park; all as far as the blue circle of rolling downs that closed the view.

She smiled to herself as she looked. Her gardens and park were well kept; her meadows and cornlands rich and fertile; her village full of a happy, contented, loyal people, who looked up to her as their benefactress and patroness. So she smiled to herself, and thought that she did well to smile.

Down below her in the garden a man was working, whom she knew to be one of the gardeners in her employ. He was doing some work that required constant stooping, but his industry was unflagging, and he wasted no time. She recognised him as a servant who was invariably cheerful, civil, and obliging, though he was not overstrong in health, and lacked the muscular physique of some of his fellows.

She called to him from the window, asking some question about his occupation. The man answered respectfully and sensibly, but did not attempt to make his reply, as many would have done, an excuse for relaxing his industry. She spoke a word or two of commendation, and sank back again into her reverie in her comfortable chair. The day proved hot, and it was not till the evening that Lady Alicia went out for her drive. As she passed along the village street, the men touched their hats as they stood outside their cottage doors, and the women curtsied, while the little boys and girls followed the example of their elders to the best of their ability, touching caps or bobbing with startling suddenness, generally spontaneously, sometimes (in the case of the younger ones) at the suggestion of their parents or their elders. The Lady smiled kindly, and felt her heart within her warm with satisfaction as she passed along.

Presently she came near one of the smaller cottages. Outside it was a man whom she recognised as Gregory, the under-gardener. He had not seen her approach, but was sitting on the raised causeway at the roadside with a child in his arms, while several others were playing round him. Though clearly tired with his work, he was doing his best to amuse them all and keep them happy and good-tempered. When he saw the Lady passing by he rose to his feet and bowed civilly with a cheerful smile. She spoke a word to him, and he explained that his wife was unwell and resting in the cottage, and that he was keeping the children away from her. The Lady promised that food and medicine should be sent from the great house, and went on her way. Her heart was still warm, and she felt at peace with herself and all the world. When she went to bed that night she quickly fell asleep, and as she slept she had a dream. She found herself walking on a narrow but plainly marked path that wound up the flank of a great hill that rose above her. All around the trees and hedges were bright with leaf and blossom, and the sky overhead was of a cloudless blue, shining with a diffused radiance that seemed somehow strange to her, so that for a few moments she gazed upwards to see in what the strangeness lay. Then she perceived that there was no sun shining in the firmament, and that the light that filled it spread evenly from

some unknown source. And with that there came into her mind the feeling that she had died, and that this was no longer her mortal body in which her soul was dwelling.

Immediately she looked with new interest at a great walled city that lay above her on the steep hillside. A city she thought it, though it was not closely built like a modern town, but lay spread on the vast green slope with wide spaces of park and garden land, in the midst of which rose houses of various forms and sizes, though all beautiful, and all promising rest and welcome for the wayfarer. Right up as far as eye could reach spread the great city, with its towers and spires and battlements all glittering in the light that shone upon them. In front there ran a low wall, and Alicia saw that the path on which she walked led directly to a wicket-gate that stood in this wall.

It climbed with some steepness, but she felt an unusual lightness in her limbs, and moved nimbly and quickly to the wicket-gate. She knew that this was heaven, though very different from any heaven she had fancied in her waking hours, and she felt no fear as to her admission. Nor was her confidence misplaced. At her knock the gate immediately opened, and an old bearded man, who seemed to be the porter, smiled at her and bade her come in forthwith. She passed in through the gate. The old man, who seemed to know who she was and all about her, said he would call some one to take her to her lodging; and presently, though Alicia could not see how he was summoned or whence he came, there stood by her a younger man, tall and comely, who greeted her kindly and bade her follow him to her house. So they went together up one of the roads that lay before them. They passed by several houses lying at a greater or less distance, some large and some small, some ornamented with carving and statuary, some plain and simple. Presently they came to a wide space at the upper end of which rose a stately palace; and, as Alicia saw her guide set his face to go in the direction of this building, she felt a hope in her heart that it might be destined for her. About half-way between them and the great house lay a small cottage of which Alicia scarcely noticed the existence, intent as she was on what lay beyond, till they came on their way quite close to it. Then suddenly her guide stopped, and, laying his hand on the low gate that marked the entrance to its garden, 'This is your house,' he said.

Alicia was dumb with surprise. 'This—my house?' she said at last. 'Yes,' said the man; 'this is the house that you have built.'

Alicia could not answer. The house was pretty enough, lying as it did in its little garden bright with larkspur and hollyhocks and other old-fashioned flowers; but it was a cottage, and no more than a cottage; and as the man began to lead the way up the red-flagged path to the door, she stopped him by laying her hand on his arm. 'Surely there is some mistake,' she said. 'This cottage cannot be mine—certainly I have not built it, as you say. And that great house on the hill yonder—for whom is that prepared?'

The man looked gravely at her. 'That house has been built by your gardener, Gregory,' he replied, and therefore it is his house. And this is yours. For houses here are built by good words spoken and good deeds done on earth, and each man finds here the house that he has built.'

Alicia strove to answer; but even as she strove the man's face grew dim, and the houses faded, and she awoke from her dream.

The morning sun was shining in, and Alicia, rising from her bed and going to the window, pulled aside a corner of the blind and looked out. Gregory was digging in the garden below, the first of all the men to be astir and at work in the morning. Alicia looked at him, but this time the tears were in her eyes, and she did not smile as she had smiled yesterday. And all the while Gregory drove in his spade, and shovelled out moist spadefuls of the shining earth.