

# The Debt

By H. F. W. Tatham

Lucius was a poet. He was a young man, and his name had not long been widely known; but it was now famous throughout all the land, far more famous than in his modesty he admitted to himself, so that he had no thought of the honour that was in store for him as he stood and watched the king ride past in triumphal procession through the streets of the town.

Lucius gazed at the great show as it went by; the infantry in their serried lines, the cavalry in their gay armour seated on their richly caparisoned horses, the symbolic pictures that showed the victories won and the towns taken, the priests in their white robes, the unhappy prisoners in their chains, and the great king himself drawn in a golden chariot by four snow-white horses; and, as he gazed, the thought of the vanity of all human triumphs came into his mind, and he sighed.

The procession passed and the streets were empty, but Lucius lingered ere he turned homewards; and, as he went slowly back, there came a man, running, who bade him wait on the king in his palace within an hour. Lucius was surprised and even alarmed at the request, never thinking what it meant; but he hastened his pace homewards, and, arraying himself in his best, made all speed to present himself at the palace gates; and he was presently shown into the room where the king sat. The latter looked at him carelessly but not ill-naturedly, and said:

‘Young man, are you not a poet? Have you not some skill in making rhymes?’

‘Sire,’ replied Lucius, ‘I sometimes put words together in verse, but my skill is poor enough.’

The king laughed roughly. ‘No mock modesty, I beg you,’ he replied. ‘I warrant you rate your art high enough in reality. But I have a command for you.’

Lucius bowed low; any command that the king might lay upon him he would faithfully fulfil according to his ability, he said.

‘You know,’ said the king, ‘that our court poet is recently dead; and in truth his loss is cheap, for he made but poor verses of late.’

Lucius bowed again, and the king went on. ‘I command you therefore to write a poem to celebrate our recent victories; and you shall be paid handsomely’; and he named a sum which dazzled Lucius by its amount. Trembling and stammering, the young man accepted the commission; and before he well knew what had happened he found himself in the street, full of joy and also of alarm, nervous as to his success, but eager to try, and determined to do his best.

The poem was written, the victories were celebrated, and Lucius duly praised the skill and courage of the king; but he did not forget to ascribe the glory and success where he felt it should be ascribed, to the overruling and almighty hand of Providence. Indeed, so strongly did he feel what he wrote on this, that the portion of the poem in which he praised the power and wisdom of God was perhaps longer than he originally intended.

The poem was sent to the palace, and Lucius heard that it had been received, and heard too that it was to be recited at a great banquet a few days afterwards, at which he himself was bidden to be present. But of praise or criticism of the poem there came not a word; nor of the payment to be made.

The day of the banquet came, and Lucius sat at one of the lower tables in the great hall; at the high table sat the king among his princes and captains. The whole hall blazed with silver and gold, and glowed with the rich colours of tapestry and banners hanging from the walls; the tables groaned beneath the weight of countless meats and red wine. The revelry rose high and lasted

long, but at length there was a pause, and, silence being made, the chief actor of the court stood up and recited Lucius' poem. The latter at first was overcome by modesty, and could hardly raise his eyes but, as he heard the sonorous words come out, he regained confidence by degrees, and began to hope that his poem might meet with a success that would reward him for the trouble that he had expended on it.

The poem ended and the applause was fairly loud, though less so perhaps at the high table where the king sat than elsewhere. But as Lucius glanced for the first time towards the king, he saw that his face was somewhat gloomy; and when presently he rose to his feet, the gloom was succeeded by an evil smile.

The king held a large purse in his hand, which he presently flung down on the table in front of him, where it clanked heavily as though with coins contained therein; then in a harsh voice he bade the poet approach.

Lucius came forward and knelt before the king. There was a moment's silence; then the king spoke, and his words were bitter.

'Take your reward,' he said, 'and joy may it bring you; but inasmuch as you have praised me but in one quarter of your poem, and in the remaining three parts have given God the glory, I give you but one quarter of the pledged recompense. For the rest, let the God you have praised be your debtor and I doubt not he will pay the debt.'

He laughed hoarsely, and after a moment's silence the captains and counsellors laughed also, and the laughter spread through the hall. There were many who thought the young poet an upstart and interloper, and rejoiced to see him humbled. With burning cheeks and downcast eyes he rose to his feet and carried the poor reward back to his place, where he remained, trembling with mortification and disappointment, till the laughter had died down and the feast went on as before.

He was roused from the dull stupor in which he sat by a servant touching him on the shoulder. 'There is one who wants you without,' said the man curtly. Lucius stared at him for a moment. 'Wants me?' he repeated. 'Yes,' said the man, 'and immediately; he told me his business was pressing, and warned you not to lose an instant in obeying the summons. He waits in the courtyard.' 'What manner of man was he?' said Lucius. 'Oh, that I know not,' said the servant; 'he was cloaked and hooded and I scarce saw his face. But I have told you what he bade me tell you'; and the servant moved off.

Lucius rose to his feet; he could not think why he was wanted, but he was not loath to go, and he could easily slip out unseen. So out of the hall he went, the few who marked him tittering and pointing; but the king did not see him, and those who did cared not. Out of the hall he went, through the pillared vestibules and into the court outside, which lay blinking in the bright sunshine. Then he looked round for the stranger. There was nobody. He thought he must be mistaken, and glanced all round the space, behind the pillars, and in the corners of the colonnade. But there was no living soul there. Angry and mortified, he thought some trick had been played on him, and he stood in the courtyard by the great bronze fountain, irresolute whether to start home or go back to the hall and face it out. And, as he stood and doubted, a sudden crack, as of thunder immediately overhead, sounded behind him, so loud and clear that he turned sharply round in sudden alarm. For a moment he saw nothing. Then there was a second crack, and he perceived that it came from above, and glanced upwards at the building he had left. To his horror he saw the great gilded dome sink slowly sideways. Then for a second the motion stopped and the dome rested, bending to the right at a terrible and threatening angle; then a huge gap yawned in its left-hand side, and the whole great fabric toppled on to the roof beneath. Under that

dreadful shock the roof burst like brittle glass, the walls bulged out, and, with a roar like thunder, the building sank like a house of cards, while the dust rose in clouds to heaven, blotting out the face of the noonday sun. And of all the company who had assembled in that hall not a living soul escaped save Lucius, whom the unknown stranger had called out into the street and safety.

Surely the reward was paid in full.