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The Roman Empire

H. Stuart Jones

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ON the thirteenth of August, B.C. 29, and the two following days, almost two years after the victory of Actium, Augustus celebrated the triple triumph which proclaimed the subjection of three continents. On the first day a train of Gallic and Illyrian captives marched behind the conqueror; on the second the beaks of Antony's ships were borne in procession, and some Asiatic potentates who had been his allies were led in golden chains; the climax was reached in the African triumph, graced by Cleopatra's two children – the last of the Ptolemies – and the priceless spoils of Egypt. The scene recalled the quadruple triumph of the great Dictator, celebrated seventeen years before; but the Romans were spared the humiliation of seeing their fellow-citizens amongst the captives. Yet it was noted that the fellow- magistrates of Augustus, instead of leading the procession according to custom, followed in his train. In name the first citizen of a Republic, he was in reality the undisputed master of the Roman world, already worshipped as God incarnate by Greeks and Orientals, reigning over Egypt as the legitimate successor of the Pharaohs and the Ptolemies, and, above all, commanding the sworn allegiance of at least 300,000 soldiers.
Three days later the round of ceremonies was closed by the dedication of the temple of the Divine Julius, and men began to ask themselves what form of government it would please his successor to establish. The answer was not given at once. Augustus was a man of very different mould from the Dictator. Lacking his commanding genius, he possessed the infinite tact and patience which succeed where genius fails. Secure in his own grasp of realities, he knew that men are ruled by imagination and cannot be moulded like the potter's clay. Julius Caesar had treated the forms of the Republican constitution with scarcely veiled contempt, and had shown clearly that his aim was to efface the traditions of 460 years and restore the monarchy. Augustus had no mind to repeat the mistake which had cost the Dictator his life. He saw that the great traditions of the all-conquering Republic formed an inheritance of which Rome would not be robbed, and that only by cherishing them could he command the services of the ablest men without destroying their self-respect. He determined, therefore, that his government should be a monarchy without a king. In the meanwhile he continued to exercise the extra-constitutional and practically unlimited powers originally conferred by the Roman people on himself, Antony, and Lepidus, in B.C. 43, as *triumviri reipublicae constituendae*. Antony was now dead, Lepidus a prisoner in exile; Augustus concentrated in himself the authority of the state. In B.C. 36, moreover, he had received the *tribunicia potestas* for life, after the precedent of the Dictator Julius; that is to say, he enjoyed personal sacrosanctity, an unlimited power of veto, and the prestige of a democratic magistracy created for the protection of the people's rights. Finally, he was year by year elected consul; and it is probable that in the years 29 and 28 B.C. he was careful to perform his public acts, so far as possible, in virtue of this constitutional office...

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