



Constantine the Great

John Firth

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THE catastrophe of the fall of Rome, with all that its fall signified to the fifth century, came very near to accomplishment in the third. There was a long period when it seemed as though nothing could save the Empire. Her prestige sank to the vanishing point. Her armies had forgotten what it was to win a victory over a foreign enemy. Her Emperors were worthless and incapable. On every side the frontiers were being pierced and the barriers were giving way.

The Franks swept over Gaul and laid it waste. They penetrated into Spain; besieged Toledo; and, seizing the galleys which they found in the Spanish ports, boldly crossed into Mauretanian Africa. Other confederations of free barbarians from southern Germany had burst through the wall of Hadrian which protected the Tithe Lands, and had followed the ancient route of invasion over the Alps. Pannonia had been ravaged by the Sarmatae and the Quadi. In successive invasions the Goths had overrun Dacia; had poured round the Black Sea or crossed it on shipboard; had sacked Trebizond and Chalcedon, and, after traversing Bithynia, had reached the coast at Ephesus. Others had advanced into Greece and Macedonia and challenged the Roman navies for the possession of Crete.

Not only was Armenia lost, but the Parthians had passed the Euphrates, vanquished and taken prisoner the Emperor Valerian, and surprised the city of Antioch while the inhabitants were idly gathered in the theatre. Valerian, chained and robed in purple, was kept alive to act as Sapor's footstool; when he died his skin was tanned and stuffed with straw and set to grace a Parthian temple. Egypt was in the hands of a rebel who had cut off the grain supply. And as if such misfortunes were not enough, there was a succession of terrifying and destructive earthquakes, which wrought their worst havoc in Asia, though they were felt in Rome and Egypt. These too were followed by a pestilence which raged for fifteen years and, according to Eutropius, claimed, when at its height, as many as five thousand victims in a single day...

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