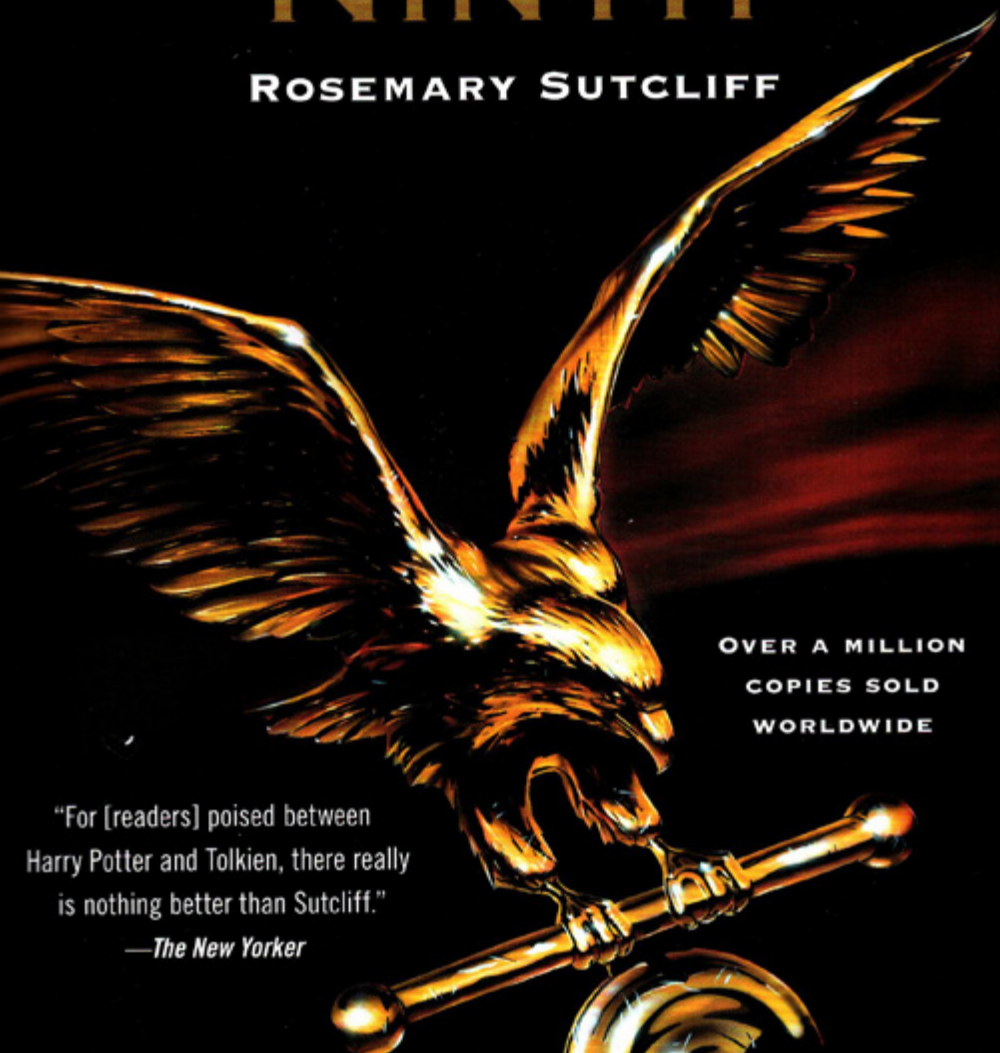


THE ROMAN BRITAIN TRILOGY

[ BOOK ONE ]

# THE EAGLE OF THE NINTH

ROSEMARY SUTCLIFF



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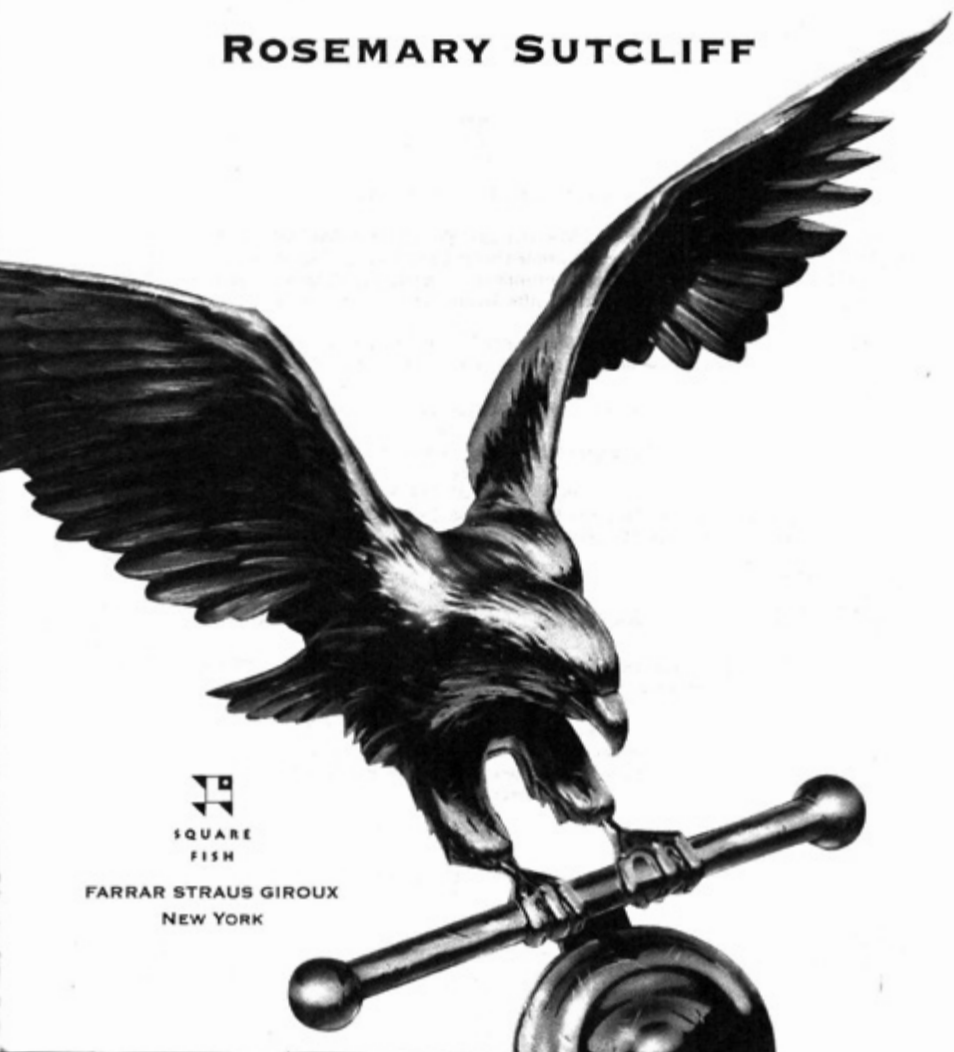
*The Eagle of the Ninth*

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# THE EAGLE OF THE NINTH

ROSEMARY SUTCLIFF



SQUARE  
FISH

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX  
NEW YORK



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## FOREWORD

*Sometime about the year AD 117, the Ninth Legion, which was stationed at Eburacum where York now stands, marched north to deal with a rising among the Caledonian tribes, and was never heard of again.*

*During the excavations at Silchester nearly eighteen hundred years later, there was dug up under the green fields which now cover the pavements of Calleva Atrebatum, a wingless Roman Eagle, a cast of which can be seen to this day in Reading Museum. Different people have had different ideas as to how it came to be there, but no one knows, just as no one knows what happened to the Ninth Legion after it marched into the northern mists.*

*It is from these two mysteries, brought together, that I have made the story of "The Eagle of the Ninth."*

—R.S.





# I

## Frontier Fort



FROM the Fosseway westward to Isca Dumnoniorum the road was simply a British trackway, broadened and roughly metalled, strengthened by corduroys of logs in the softest places, but otherwise unchanged from its old estate, as it wound among the hills, thrusting farther and farther into the wilderness.

It was a busy road and saw many travellers: traders with bronze weapons and raw yellow amber in their ponies' packs; country folk driving shaggy cattle or lean pigs from village to village; sometimes a band of tawny-haired tribesmen from farther west; strolling harpers and quack-oculists too, or a light-stepping hunter with huge wolf-hounds at his heel; and from time to time a commissariat wagon going up and down to supply the Roman frontier post. The road saw them all, and the cohorts of the Eagles for whom all other travellers must make way.

There was a cohort of leather-clad auxiliaries on the road today, swinging along at the steady Legion's pace that had brought them down from Isca Silurium at twenty miles a day; the new garrison coming to relieve the old one at Isca Dumnoniorum. On they went, following the road that now ran out on a causeway between sodden marsh and empty sky, now plunged into deep boar-hunted forest, or lifted over bleak uplands where nothing grew save furze and thorn-scrub. On with never a halt nor a change of rhythm, marching Century by Century, the sun bright on the Standard at their head, and the rolling dust-cloud kicked up over the pack-train behind.

At the head of the column marched the Pilus Prior Centurion, the Cohort Commander, the pride that shone from him showing clearly that this was his first command. They were, he had long since decided, a command worthy of anyone's pride; six hundred yellow-haired giants recruited from the tribes of Upper Gaul, with the natural fighting power of mountain cats, drilled and hammered into what he firmly believed to be the finest Auxiliary Cohort ever to serve with the

## The Eagle of the Ninth

Second Legion. They were a newly joined Cohort; many of the men had not yet proved themselves in action, and the spear-shaft of their Standard had no honours on it, no gilded laurel wreath nor victor's crown. The honours were all to win—perhaps during his command.

The Commander was a complete contrast to his men: Roman to his arrogant finger-tips, wiry and dark as they were raw-boned and fair. The olive-skinned face under the curve of his crested helmet had not a soft line in it anywhere—a harsh face it would have been, but that it was winged with laughter lines, and between his level black brows showed a small raised scar that marked him for one who had passed the Raven Degree of Mithras.

Centurion Marcus Flavius Aquila had seen little of the Eagles until a year ago. His first ten years had been lived quietly with his mother on the family farm near Clusium, while his father soldiered in Judaea, in Egypt, and here in Britain. They had been going to join his father in Britain, but before the time came for them to do so, rebellion had flared up among the northern tribes, and the Ninth Hispana, his father's Legion, had marched north to deal with it, and never came marching back.

His mother had died soon afterward, leaving him to be brought up in Rome by a rather foolish aunt and the plump and purse-proud official who was her husband. Marcus had loathed the official, and the official had loathed Marcus. They saw everything with different eyes. Marcus came of a line of soldiers—one of those Equestrian families who, when the rest of their kind had turned from soldiering to trade and finance, had kept to the old way of life, and remained poor but held their noses high in consequence. The official came of a line of officials, and his code of life was quite other than Marcus's. Neither of them had a shred of understanding for each other's ideas, and they had both been thankful when Marcus was eighteen and could apply for a centurion's commission.

Marcus, his eyes narrowed into the sun as he marched, smiled to himself a little wryly, as he remembered how almost pathetically thankful that plump official had been. (*Tramp, tramp, tramp*, said the cohort's feet behind him.)

He had asked to be sent to Britain, though it meant starting in an auxiliary cohort instead of a line-of-battle one, partly because his father's elder brother had settled there when his own years of soldiering were done, but mostly because of his father. If ever

anything became known of the lost Legion, it would be known first in Britain, and it might even be that here in Britain he would find out something for himself.

Marching down the Isca Dumnoniorum road in the run-honey evening light, he found himself thinking about his father. He had very vivid memories of a slight, dark man with laughter lines at the corners of his eyes, who had come home from time to time, and taught him to fish, to play "Flash the Fingers," and throw a javelin. He remembered vividly that last leave of all. His father had just been appointed to command the First Cohort of the Hispana, which meant having charge of the Eagle and being something very like second-in-command of the Legion besides; and he had been like a jubilant boy about it. But his mother had been faintly anxious, almost as if she knew . . .

"If it was any *other* Legion!" she had said. "You have told me yourself that the Hispana has a bad name."

And his father had replied: "But I would not have it any other Legion if I could. I held my first command in the Hispana, and a man's first Legion is apt to hold chief place in his heart ever after, be its name good or bad; and now that I go back to it as First Cohort, we will see whether there is nothing can be done to better its name." He had turned to his small son, laughing. "Presently it will be your turn. It has fallen on evil days, but we will make a Legion of the Hispana yet, you and I."

Looking back across the years, Marcus remembered that his father's eyes had been very bright, like the eyes of a man going into action; and the light had caught suddenly in the great flawed emerald of the signet-ring he always wore, striking from it a spark of clear green fire. Odd how one remembered things like that: little things that somehow mattered.

(*Tramp, tramp, tramp*, came the sound of the cohort's feet behind him.)

It would be pleasant, he thought, if Uncle Aquila was like his father. He had not met his uncle yet; after learning his foot-drill he had arrived in Britain in the sleety days of late autumn, and been sent straight up to Isca; but he had a rather vague invitation to spend his leave with him at Calleva, when he had any leave to spend. It would be very pleasant if Uncle Aquila was like his father.

Not of course that he and his uncle were likely to have much to do

## *The Eagle of the Ninth*

with each other. In a few years' time he would probably be serving in quite a different part of the Empire, since a Cohort Centurion seldom moved up all the way in the same Legion.

All the way . . . from his present rank right up to his father's rank of First Cohort; and after that? For most of the men who got so far there was nothing after that, but for the outstanding few who went further—as Marcus intended to go further—the ways divided there. One could become a Camp Commandant, as Uncle Aquila had done, or one could go on, by way of the Praetorian Guard, to try for command of a Legion. Legion Commanders were almost always men of Senator's rank, with no experience of soldiering save a year's service as Military Tribune in their youth; but by long custom the two Egyptian Legions were exceptions to the rule. They were commanded by professional soldiers; and an Egyptian Legion had been Marcus's shining goal for as long as he could remember.

But one day, when he had finished with the Eagles, when he had made an honourable name and become Prefect of his Egyptian Legion, he would go home to the Etruscan hills, and perhaps even buy back the old farm, which the plump official had ruthlessly sold to defray expenses. For a moment he remembered almost painfully the sunlit courtyard flickered over with the shadow of pigeons' wings, and the wild olive tree in the loop of the stream, on a twisted root of which he had once found a kind of gall growing, that was shaped something like a little bird. He had cut it from the root with the new knife his father had given him, and spent much loving care, all one absorbed summer evening, trimming and carving feathers on it. He had that little bird still.

The road topped a gentle rise, and suddenly Isca Dumnoniorum lay before them, with the fortress-crowned Red Mount dark with shadows against the evening sky; and Marcus came back to the present with a jerk. The farm in the Etruscan hills could wait until he was old and tired and famous; in the present was the glory of his first command.

The British town was spread below the southern scarp of the Mount; a sprawling huddle of reed-thatched roofs, every colour from the gold of honey to the black of dried peat, according to the age of the thatch; with the squared, clean lines of the Roman forum and basilica looking oddly rootless in their midst; and the faint haze of woodsmoke lying over all.

The road led straight through the town and up to the cleared slope

beyond, to the Praetorian gate of the fort; here and there, crimson- or saffron-cloaked men turned to look at the cohort as it swung by, a look that was reserved rather than hostile. Dogs sat scratching in odd corners, lean pigs rooted among the garbage piles, and women with bracelets of gold or copper on very white arms sat in hut doorways, spinning, or grinding corn. The blue smoke of many cooking-fires curled up into the quiet air, and the savoury smell of many evening meals mingled with the blue reek of woodsmoke and the sharper tang of horse-droppings, which Marcus had by now come to associate with all British towns. Little that was Roman was here as yet, despite the stone-built forum. One day there would be straight streets, he supposed, and temples and bathhouses and a Roman way of life. But as yet it was a place where two worlds met without mingling; a British town huddled under the dominion of the turf ramparts where once the tribe had had its stronghold and now the Roman sentries paced up and down. He looked about him under the curve of his helmet as he marched, knowing that this place would be part of his life for the next year; then looked up to the turf ramparts, and saw a Roman banner drooping in the still air and the tall crest of a sentry burning in the sunset, and heard a trumpet-call ring out, as it seemed, from the fiery sky.

"You have brought clear skies with you," said Centurion Quintus Hilarion, lounging in the window of the Commander's quarters, and peering into the night. "But Hercle! you need not expect it to last."

"As bad as that?" said Centurion Marcus Aquila, who was seated on the table.

"Quite as bad as that! It rains always, here in the west, save when Typhon, the father of all ills, brews up a mist to come between a man and his own feet. By the time you have served your year here you will have toadstools sprouting out of your ears, the same as me, *and* not from the damp alone!"

"From what besides?" enquired Marcus with interest.

"Oh, lack of company, for one thing. I am a sociable soul myself; I like my friends around me." He turned from the window, and folded up on to a low cushioned bench, hugging his knees. "Ah well, I am off to rub away the blue mould as soon as I have marched the troops back to Isca."

"Going on leave?"

## The Eagle of the Ninth

The other nodded. "Long leave, lovely leave, among the flesh-pots of Durinum."

"Durinum—that is your home?" asked Marcus.

"Yes. My father retired and settled there a few years ago. There is a surprisingly good circus, and plenty of people—pretty girls too. A pleasant enough place to get back to, out of the wilds." An idea seemed to strike him. "What shall you do when your leave falls due? I suppose, coming out from home, you have no one here to go to?"

"I have an uncle at Calleva, though I have not yet met him," Marcus said, "and certainly there is no one at home I should want to spend my leave with."

"Father and mother both dead?" enquired Hilarion with friendly interest.

"Yes. My father went with the Ninth Legion."

"Pericol! You mean when they—"

"Disappeared. Yes."

"So. That is bad!" said Hilarion, wagging his head. "A deal of ugly stories, there were—still are, for that matter; and of course, they did lose the Eagle."

Instantly Marcus was up in arms to defend his father and his father's Legion. "Since not a man of the Legion came back, it is scarcely a matter for wonder that neither did the Eagle," he flashed.

"Surely not," agreed Hilarion amicably. "I was not blowing on your father's honour, so you can keep your feathers on, my Marcus." He looked up at the other with a wide, friendly grin, and suddenly Marcus, who had been ready to quarrel with him the instant before, found himself grinning back.

It was several hours since Marcus had marched his Cohort across the hollow-ringing bridge, answering the sentry's challenge, "Fourth Gaulish Auxiliaries of the Second Legion, come to relieve this garrison." Dinner was over, in the officers' mess, with the Quartermaster, the Surgeon, and the double complement of ranker Centurions. Marcus had taken charge of the pay-chest keys—in a garrison as small as this there was no paymaster; and for the past hour, here in the Commander's quarters in the Praetorium, he and Hilarion had been going through the office work of the frontier fort. Now, crested helmets and embossed breastplates laid aside, the two of them were taking their ease.

Through the doorless opening Marcus could see almost the whole

of the sleeping-cell, the narrow cot piled with gay native rugs, the polished oaken chest, the lamp-bracket high on the bare wall, and nothing more. The outer room held the battered writing table on which Marcus was sitting, a cross-legged camp-stool, the cushioned bench to represent comfort, another chest for the record rolls, and a bronze pedestal lamp of peculiarly hideous design.

In the little silence that had fallen between them, Marcus looked round him at the austere room in the yellow flood of lamplight, and to him it seemed beautiful. But though it would be his tomorrow, for this one night he was a guest here, and he looked back to his host with a quick smile of apology for having looked too soon at his surroundings with the eye of mastery.

Hilarion grinned. "You will not be feeling like that this day next year."

"I wonder," said Marcus, swinging one sandalled foot and idly watching the swing of it. "What does one do here, besides growing toadstools? Is there good hunting?"

"Good enough; it is the one thing to be said for this particular corner of the Empire. Boar and wolf in the winter, and the forest swarms with deer. There are several hunters below in the town, who will take you out for the price of the day's work. Unwise to go alone, of course."

Marcus nodded. "Have you any advice for me? I am new to this country."

The other considered. "No, I think not." Then he sat up with a jerk. "Yes, I have, if no one has warned you already. But it has nothing to do with the hunting. It is the priest-kind—the wandering Druids. If one of them appears in the district, or you get the least idea that there is one about, look to your weapons. Good advice, that is."

"The Druids?" Marcus was surprised and puzzled. "But surely Suetonius Paulinus dealt with them once and for all, sixty years ago?"

"As an organized priesthood, maybe; but as easily hold off these heathen mists with a palm-leaf umbrella as end the Druids by destroying their stronghold. They spring up still, from time to time, and wherever they do spring up, there is likely to be trouble for the Eagles. They were the heart and soul of British resistance in the early days, and even now, when there is any sign of unrest among the tribes, you can wager your sandals there is a holy man at the bottom of it."

"Go on," Marcus prodded, as the other seemed to have finished. "This becomes interesting."

## *The Eagle of the Ninth*

"Well, the thing is this. They can preach holy war, and that is ever the most deadly kind, for it recks nothing of consequences." Hilarion spoke slowly, as though he was thinking the thing out as he went along. "The frontier tribes are not like those of the south coast, who were half Romanized before ever we landed; they are a wild lot, and superbly brave; but even they have mostly come to think that we are not fiends of darkness, and they have enough sense to see that destroying the local garrison will only mean a punitive expedition and their homes and standing crops burned, and a stronger garrison with a heavier hand thereafter. But let one of their holy men lay hold of them, and all that goes whistling down the wind. They cease to think whether there can be any good come of their rising, cease to think at all. They are keeping faith with their gods by smoking out a nest of the unbelievers, and what happens after is no concern of theirs, for they are going West of the Sunset by the warriors' road. And when you get men into that state there is apt to be trouble coming."

Outside in the quiet darkness the trumpets sounded for the second watch of the night. Hilarion uncurled himself and stood up. "We had best do Late Rounds together tonight," he said, and reached for his sword, slipping the baldrick over his head. "I am native born," he added as though in explanation. "That is how I come to have some understanding of these matters."

"I imagined that you must be." Marcus tested a buckle of his own equipment. "You have had no holy man round here, I suppose?"

"No, but my predecessor had a certain amount of trouble just before I took over, and the troublemaker slipped through his fingers and disappeared. We lived a month or two on Vesuvius—all the more so as the harvest was bad for the second year running—but it never erupted."

Footsteps sounded outside, and a red light glimmered at the window; and they went out together to the Duty Centurion, who stood outside with a flaring torch. The clashing Roman salute was exchanged, and they set out on their tour of the darkened fort, from sentry-post to sentry-post along the rampart walk, from guard-point to guard-point, with the low exchange of the password; lastly to the small lighted room in the Praetorium where the pay-chest was kept and the Standard stood against the wall, and between rounds the Duty Centurion sat with his drawn sword on the table before him, through the night.



## Frontier Fort

Marcus thought: After tonight it will be for me alone to follow the centurion's torch from guard-post to guard-post, from barrack block to horse-lines, seeing that all is well with the frontier of the Empire.

Next morning, after the formal take-over ceremony in the forum, the old garrison marched out. Marcus watched them go, out across the ditch and downhill between the crowding hovels of the native town whose reed-thatched roofs were gold-dusted by the morning sun. Century after Century, marching away up the long road that led to Isca; and at their head the glint of gold and crimson that was the Cohort Standard. He narrowed his eyes into the piercing light, and watched that coloured glint till it disappeared into the brightness of the morning. The last driver of the baggage-train dropped out of sight beyond the lift of the road, the rhythmic *tramp-tramp-tramp* of heavily sandalled feet ceased to pulse through the sunlit air, and Marcus was alone with his first command.

## II

### Feathers in the Wind



BEFORE many days had passed, Marcus had slipped so completely into the life of the frontier fort that it seemed as though he had never known any other. The plan of all Roman forts was much the same, and the pattern of life lived in them, so that knowing one meant knowing them all, whether it was the stone-built camp of the Praetorian Guard itself, or a baked mud fort on the Upper Nile, or this one at Isca Dumnoniorum, where the ramparts were of rammed turf, and the Cohort Standard and the officers were all housed together in one small square of wattle-and-daub buildings round a colonnaded courtyard. But after a few days Marcus began to know the individualities that made every camp different, after all, from every other; and it was these differences, rather than the samenesses, that made him feel at home in Isca. An artist of some long-departed garrison had scratched with his dagger a beautiful leaping wild cat on the bath-house wall, and someone less gifted had scratched a very rude picture of a Centurion he had not liked; you could tell that it was a Centurion, by the vine-staff and the Centurion's mark > scored beneath it. There was a martin's nest under the eaves of the shrine where the Standard was housed, and an odd and untraceable smell behind Number Two storehouse. And in one corner of the officers' courtyard, some past Commander, homesick for the warmth and colour of the South, had planted a rosebush in a great stone wine-jar, and already the buds were showing crimson among the dark leaves. That rosebush gave Marcus a sense of continuance; it was a link between him and those who had been before him, here on the frontier, and the others who would come after. It must have been there a long time, and it was becoming pot-bound; he thought that in the autumn he would see about having a proper bed made for it.

It took him a little while to settle down with his officers. The Surgeon, who appeared, like the Quartermaster, to be a fixture, was a gentle soul, content enough in his backwater so long as it contained

sufficient of the fiery native spirit; but the Quartermaster himself was something of a trial, a little red angry man who had missed promotion and grown overfull of his own importance in consequence. Lutorius, who commanded the fort's one squadron of Dacian Horse, spent all his friendliness on his horses and was reserved to the point of sullenness with all men, even his own. Marcus's five ranker Centurions were all so much older and more experienced than he was that at first he was uncertain how to deal with them. It was not easy, with less than a year with the Eagles behind him, to tell Centurion Paulus that he was overfond of using his vine-staff on his men's backs; or make Centurion Galba understand that, whatever might be the custom in other Cohorts, the Centurions of the Fourth Gaulish were not going to take bribes from their men for letting them off fatigues, while he was in command. But he managed it somehow, and the odd thing was that though both Galba and Paulus raged inwardly at the time, and even talked to each other about puppies, there was a better understanding between them and the Cohort Commander afterward. And between Marcus and his second-in-command there was a good working understanding from the first, which grew to a warm liking as time went by. Centurion Drusillus, like most of his kind, was promoted from the ranks; he was a veteran of many campaigns, full of odd wisdom and hard counsel; and Marcus had need of such, that summer. Day started with the trumpets sounding cockcrow from the ramparts, and ended with Late Rounds; and between came all the complicated pattern of parades and fatigues, patrols out and in, stables, arms drill. He had to be his own magistrate too; he had to deal with the situation when one of his men claimed that a tribesman had sold him a worthless dog; or a tribesman complained that someone from the fort had stolen his poultry; or when the Dacians and the Gauls fell out over some obscure question of a tribal god whom he had never heard of before.

It was hard work, especially in the earliest days, and he was thankful for Centurion Drusillus; but the work was in his blood, just as farming was, and it was work that he loved. And it was not all work: there was the occasional day's hunting too—good hunting, even as Hilarion had said.

His usual guide and companion on the trail was a Briton not many years older than himself, a hunter and horse-dealer, Cradoc by name. And on a morning of late summer he went down from the fort, carrying his hunting-spears, to pick up Cradoc according to custom.

## *The Eagle of the Ninth*

It was very early, the sun not yet up, and the mist lying like a white sea between the hills. Scent would lie low and heavy on such a morning, and he sniffed the dawn chill like a hound. And yet he could not find his usual pleasure in the fine hunting morning, for he was worried. Not very worried, but enough to take the keen edge off the blade of his enjoyment; turning over in his mind the rumour that had been drifting through the fort for the past day or two—the rumour of a wandering Druid having been seen in the district. Oh, no one had actually seen him themselves; it was much more vague than that. Nonetheless, remembering Hilarion's warning, he had checked up as best he could, without of course the least result. But even if there were something in the wind, there would be no result—nothing to be got even from the few men who held official positions from Rome; if their first loyalty was to Rome they would know nothing; if it was to their Tribe they would tell nothing. Probably there was not a scrap of truth in the story; it was just one of those floating rumours that blew up from time to time, like a wind out of nowhere. But he would keep his eyes and ears open, all the same, especially as once again, for the third year running, the harvest was going to be a poor one. You could tell that from the faces of the men and women, as well as you could from their little fields, where the corn stood thin and shrivelled in the ear. A bad harvest was always the time to look for trouble.

As he threaded his way among the crowding huts beyond the forum, it struck Marcus again how untouched this place was by Rome. The Tribe found the forum and basilica useful to hold their markets in. One or two men had laid aside their hunting-spears to become Roman officials, occasionally one even saw a Roman tunic. There were wine-shops everywhere, the craftsmen of the town made things to please the garrison, and everybody else sold them dogs, skins, vegetables, and fighting cocks, while the children scrambled after the Auxiliaries for denarii. But all the same, here in Isca Dumnoniorum, Rome was a new slip grafted on to an old stock—and the graft had not yet taken.

He reached the cluster of huts that were Cradoc's, and turned aside at the houseplace door, whistling a few bars of the latest tune running in the Legions, with which he was used to announce his arrival. The leather apron over the doorway was drawn aside at once, but instead of the hunter, there appeared a girl with a solemn sunburned baby on her hip. She was tall, as were most British women, and carried herself like a queen; but the thing that Marcus noticed

## *Feathers in the Wind*

about her was the look on her face: a queer, guarded look, as though she had drawn a veil behind her eyes so that he should not see in.

"My man is out behind with his chariot team. If the Commander goes to look, he will find him," she said, and stepped back, letting the leather apron fall between them.

Marcus went to look. The sound of the hunter's voice and a horse's soft whinny gave him his direction, and making his way between the woodpile and a tethered cock whose feathers shone with metallic colours among the duller hens, he reached the doorway of a stable hut, and looked in. Cradoc turned to the doorway as he appeared, and gave him a courteous greeting.

Marcus returned it—by this time he spoke the Celtic tongue fluently, though with an appalling accent—but he was staring into the shadows behind the other man. "I did not know you drove the Royal Fours in these parts," he said.

"We are not above learning some lessons from Rome. Have you never chanced to see my team before?"

Marcus shook his head. "I did not even know you for a charioteer, though I suppose I might have guessed. The British are all charioteers."

"The Commander is mistaken," Cradoc said, drawing his hand down a glossy neck. "The British can all drive after a fashion; not everyone is a charioteer."

"You, I take it, are a charioteer?"

"I am accounted among the best of my Tribe," Cradoc said with quiet dignity.

Marcus had moved in from the doorway. "May I see your team?" he asked, and the other stood aside for him without a word.

The four were loose in their stable, and they came to him almost like dogs to sniff enquiringly at his breast and outstretched hands; four superbly matched black chariot ponies. He thought of the Arab team he had sometimes driven in Rome. These were smaller—under fourteen hands, he judged—thicker coated, and for their size a little more heavily built, but in their way they seemed to him without match; the heads that turned to him gentle and intelligent, the ears pricked and delicate as flower petals, the quivering nostrils lined with vivid red, the breasts and haunches deep and powerful. He turned from one to another, moving among them, fondling them, running a practised hand over their lithe bodies from proud crest to sweeping tail.

## *The Eagle of the Ninth*

Before he left Rome, Marcus had been in a fair way to becoming a charioteer, in Cradoc's sense of the word, and now desire woke in him, not to possess this team, for he was not one of those who must be able to say "Mine" before they can truly enjoy a thing, but to have them out and harnessed; to feel the vibrating chariot floor under him, and the spread reins quick with life in his hands, and these lovely, fiery little creatures in the traces, his will and theirs at one.

Turning, with a soft muzzle against his shoulder, he said, "Will you let me try your team?"

"They are not for sale."

"If they were, I could not afford to buy them. I asked that I might try them."

"The Commander also is a charioteer?" Cradoc said.

At the Saturnalia Games last year, Marcus had been put up to race a borrowed team against a staff officer, reputed to be the finest driver in the Legion; and he had won. "I am accounted the best in my Legion," he said.

Cradoc did not seem to think his question answered. "I doubt if you could handle these black jewels of mine."

"Will you take a wager on it?" Marcus asked, his eyes suddenly cool and bright, and his mouth smiling.

"A wager?"

"That I will handle your team to your satisfaction, over ground of your own choosing," Marcus slipped a brooch from the shoulder of his rough cloak, and held it out, the red cornelian with which it was set gleaming faintly in the shadows. "This fibula against—against one of your hunting spears. Or if that does not suit you, name your own stakes."

Cradoc did not look at the fibula. He was looking at Marcus, rather as though the young Roman was a horse whose mettle he wished to gauge, and Marcus, facing the cool stocktaking, felt himself flushing. The hunter noticed the angry colour, and the arrogantly raised head, and a queer little twisted smile lifted one side of his mouth. Then, as though satisfied by his scrutiny, he said: "I will take the wager."

"When do we put the matter to the test?" asked Marcus, returning the brooch to the shoulder of his cloak.

"I am taking a draft of horses up to Durinum tomorrow; but in eight days I shall be back. We will hold the trial on my return. And now, it is time that we were away."

## *Feathers in the Wind*

"So be it," said Marcus; and with a final pat to a glossy neck, he turned and followed Cradoc from the stable. They whistled the waiting hounds to heel, collected hunting-spears from the house-place wall where they had been propped, and disappeared into the wilderness.

Cradoc was away longer than he expected, and the harvest, such as it was (there would be many hungry in Isca Dumnoniorum that winter), was gathered in by the time the trial took place. Marcus was turning over in his mind the question of getting in extra grain supplies when he arrived at the appointed meeting ground, a wide stretch of level land in the curve of the river, to find the other waiting for him. Cradoc flung up an arm in greeting as he appeared from the woodshore, and springing into the chariot, turned the team and came thundering towards him through the swaying fern at a gallop. The sun flashed back in spars of light from the bronze ornaments on the breasts and foreheads of the team, and the long hair of the charioteer was flying like the ponies' manes. Marcus stood his ground, though with an uncomfortable tightening of his stomach, until at the last moment the ponies were brought to a rearing halt almost on top of him and the charioteer ran out along the yoke-pole and stood poised against the sky.

"A pretty trick," said Marcus, grinning up at him. "I have heard of it before, but never seen it until today."

The other laughed and stepped back into the chariot, and as he brought the team round, Marcus side-stepped and sprang in beside him. The reins and the many-folded lash changed hands, and Cradoc drew back into the spearman's place, with a hand on the wickerwork side of the chariot. "Take them across to the dead ash tree yonder, for a start."

"All in good time." said Marcus. "I am not yet ready."

The ponies were harnessed Roman fashion, the two inner to the yoke-pole, the two outer by traces to the axles. So far, so good; but the chariot was another matter. Until now his driving had all been done in a Roman racing chariot, a mere cockle-shell with room for no one but the driver; this thing was twice as big, though fairly light, and the open front gave one a sense of being on top of the team which was new to him. To get the best out of chariot and team, certain allowances must be made. Holding the carefully separated reins high, in

## *The Eagle of the Ninth*

the approved Colosseum manner, his feet wide planted on the interlaced straps of the chariot bed, he set the fidgeting team in motion; easily at first, getting the feel of them, then steadying them from a trot into a canter, as he headed for the silvery target of the dead ash tree. Just before it, he wheeled them, obedient to Cradoc's direction, and sent them weaving delicately down the curved row of javelins that the other had stuck upright in the turf before his arrival, in the same way that he had woven the white Arabs between the practice posts on Mars Field, his speed quickening to a gallop, but with never a grazed wheel-hub to disgrace him. He took the team through every trick and test that their master ordered, until the moment came for a final burst of speed, and they were sweeping at full gallop round the mile-wide curve of the woodshore.

To Marcus that moment was always like being born from one kind of life into another. So must an arrow feel when it leaves the bow! It had been hot and sultry in the old life, but in this one the cool wind flowed against him like water, pressing his thin scarlet tunic into his body, singing past his ears above the soft thunder of the ponies' flying hooves. He crouched lower, feeling the chariot floor buoyant and vibrating under his wide-set feet, feeling the reins quick with life in his hands, his will flowing out along them to the flying team, and their response flowing back to him, so that they were one. He called to them in the Celtic tongue, urging them on.

"On, brave hearts! On, bold and beautiful! Thy mares shall be proud of thee, the tribe shall sing thy praises to their children's children! Sweff! Sweff, my brothers!"

For the first time he loosed the lash, letting it fly out and flicker like dark lightning above their ears without ever touching them. The forest verge spun by, the fern streaked away beneath flying hooves and whirling wheels. He and his team were a comet shooting down the bright ways of the sky; a falcon stooping against the sun . . .

Then, on a word from Cradoc, he was backed on the reins, harder, bringing the team to a rearing halt, drawn back in full gallop onto their haunches. The wind of his going died, and the heavy heat closed round him again. It was very still, and the shimmering, sunlit scene seemed to pulse on his sight. Before the wheels had ceased to turn, Cradoc had sprung down and gone to the ponies' heads. After the first plunging moment, they stood quite quiet, their flanks heaving a little, but not over-much.



## *Feathers in the Wind*

"Well?" demanded Marcus, rubbing the back of his hand across his wet forehead.

Cradoc looked up at him, unsmiling. "The Commander begins to be a charioteer," he said.

Marcus laid by reins and lash, and stepped down to join him. "I have not driven a team to better these," he said, and curved his arm over an arched neck. "Do I win my spear?"

"Come and choose it for yourself, before you go back to the fort," said the other. He had brought sweet crusts with him in the breast of his tunic, and he held them out on his open palms to the soft questing lips of the ponies. "These four are the jewels of my heart. They are descended out of the Royal Stables of the Icenii, and there are few could handle them better than the Commander." And there was a queer note of regret in his voice, for which there seemed no reason; but Marcus was to remember it afterward.

They drove back slowly, walking the ponies through the summer evening.

"It will not harm them to stand for a little, now that they have cooled off," Cradoc said, as, after threading their way through the confused huddle of the town, he pulled up before his own house-place. He drew the reins over the ponies' heads and turned to the dark doorway, calling, "Guinhumara, bring out to me my spears."

The leather apron had been drawn back to let in what air there was, and the red fire glowed in the centre of the house-place. Marcus saw the tall girl rise without a word—she had been turning wheat cakes among the hot ash for her man's supper—and melt into the darkness of some inner place. Several dogs which had been lying in the piled fern, with the small brown baby sleeping in their midst, came out with waving tails to fawn around their master, but the baby slept on, sucking its thumb. In a few moments the girl came back and joined them in the doorway, carrying a sheaf of spears whose polished blades caught the evening light like so many tongues of flame.

"The Commander and I have laid a wager," said Cradoc. "His brooch against one of my hunting-spears. He has won, and now he is come to choose his spear." As he spoke, he took one from the sheaf and stood leaning on it with a gesture that said quite plainly, "But not this one."

Those that were left were fine weapons, beautiful as were all the weapons of the Celts, perfectly balanced and deadly; some light for

## *The Eagle of the Ninth*

throwing, some broad-bladed for close work, some for war, some for hunting. The girl handed them to Marcus one by one, and he tested and examined them, finally picking one with a slender, barbed blade and a crosspiece just below the neck. "This one," he said. "It shall be this one, for when I hunt boar with your husband this winter." He smiled at her, but she did not smile back; her face had the same veiled look that he remembered on it before. She stepped back without a word, and carried the remaining spears with her into the houseplace. But Marcus had already turned to the hunter, for that other spear had caught his interest, and been in his mind even while he made his choice. It was to the rest of the sheaf what a king is to his bodyguard; the shaft darkened with much handling, the iron blade perfect in shape as a laurel leaf, engraved with a strange and potent design that swirled like the eddies in running water. The weight of the head was counterbalanced by a ball of enamelled bronze on the butt, and about its neck was a collar of blue-grey heron's feathers.

"I have not seen the like of this before," Marcus said. "It is a war-spear, is it not?"

Cradoc's hand caressed the smooth shaft. "It was my father's war-spear," he said. "It was in his hand when he died—up yonder under our old ramparts where the fortress walls stand now. See, the mark is still upon it . . . his own blood, and the blood of his enemy." He parted the heron's feathers to show the neck of the shaft blackened by an old stain.

A little while afterward, carrying his newly-won boar spear, Marcus made his way back toward the Praetorian gate. Children and hounds were playing together in the low sunshine, and here and there a woman in a hut doorway called the evening greeting to him as he passed. It all seemed very peaceful, and yet he was filled with an uneasy feeling that the peace was only a film—a veil like that which the girl Guinhumara had drawn behind her eyes—and that underneath, something very different was stirring. Again he remembered Hilarion's warning.

For the collar of the old war spear had been lately renewed, and the heron's feathers were still bright with the lustre of a living bird.

In all likelihood that spear had been refurbished many times, kept bright by a son in memory of his father; and yet, he wondered suddenly, in how many of these thatched homesteads had an old

### *Feathers in the Wind*

spear been put in fighting trim? Then he shook his shoulders impatiently, and strode on at a quickened pace up the steep way to the gate. He was simply growing toadstools, even as Hilarion had prophesied. All this because of a few feathers. Yet even a feather might show which way the wind blew.

If only they could have had a good harvest!

### III

## Attack!



IN the dark hour before the dawn, two nights later, Marcus was roused out of his sleep by the Duty Centurion. A pilot lamp always burned in his sleeping-cell against just such an emergency, and he was fully awake on the instant.

"What is it, Centurion?"

"The sentries on the south rampart report sounds of movement between us and the town, sir."

Marcus was out of bed and had swung his heavy military cloak over his sleeping-tunic. "You have been up yourself?"

The Centurion stood aside for him to pass out into the darkness. "I have, sir," he said with grim patience.

"Anything to be seen?"

"No, sir, but there is something stirring down there, for all that."

Quickly they crossed the main street of the fort, and turned down beside a row of silent workshops. Then they were mounting the steps to the rampart walk. The shape of a sentry's helmet rose dark against the lesser darkness above the breastwork, and there was a rustle and thud as he grounded his pilum in salute.

Marcus went to the breast-high parapet. The sky had clouded over so that not a star was to be seen, and all below was a formless blackness with nothing visible save the faint pallor of the river looping through it. Not a breath of air stirred in the stillness, and Marcus, listening, heard no sound in all the world save the whisper of the blood in his own ears, far fainter than the sea in a conch-shell.

He waited, breath in check; then from somewhere below came the *kee-wick, kee-wick, wick-wick* of a hunting owl, and a moment later a faint and formless sound of movement that was gone almost before he could be sure that he had not imagined it. He felt the Duty Centurion grow tense as a strung bow beside him. The moments crawled by, the silence became a physical pressure on his eardrums. Then the sounds

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came again, and with the sounds, blurred forms moved suddenly on the darkness of the open turf below the ramparts.

Marcus could almost hear the twang of breaking tension. The sentry swore softly under his breath, and the Centurion laughed.

"Somebody will be spending a busy day looking for his strayed cattle!"

Strayed cattle; that was all. And yet for Marcus the tension had not snapped into relief. Perhaps if he had never seen the new heron's feathers on an old war spear it might have done, but he had seen them, and somewhere deep beneath his thinking mind the instinct for danger had remained with him ever since. Abruptly he drew back from the breastwork, speaking quickly to his officer. "All the same, a break-out of cattle might make good cover for something else. Centurion, this is my first command: if I am being a fool, that must excuse me. I am going back to get some more clothes on. Turn out the Cohort to action stations as quietly as may be."

And not waiting for a reply, he turned, and dropping from the rampart walk, strode off toward his own quarters.

In a short while he was back, complete from studded sandals to crested helmet, and knotting the crimson scarf about the waist of his breastplate as he came. From the faintly lit doorways of the barrack rows, men were tumbling out, buckling sword-belts or helmet-straps as they ran, and heading away into the darkness. Am I being every kind of fool? Marcus wondered. Am I going to be laughed at so long as my name is remembered in the Legion, as the man who doubled the guard for two days because of a bunch of feathers, and then turned out his Cohort to repel a herd of milch-cows? But it was too late to worry about that now. He went back to the ramparts, finding them already lined with men, the reserves massing below. Centurion Drusillus was waiting for him, and he spoke to the older man in a quick, miserable undertone. "I think I must have gone mad, Centurion; I shall never live this down."

"Better to be a laughing-stock than lose the fort for fear of being one," returned the Centurion. "It does not pay to take chances on the frontier—and there was a new moon last night."

Marcus had no need to ask his meaning. In his world the gods showed themselves in new moons, in seed-time and harvest, summer and winter solstice; and if an attack were to come, the new moon would be the time for it. Holy War. Hilarion had understood all about

that. He turned aside to give an order. The waiting moments lengthened; the palms of his hands were sticky, and his mouth uncomfortably dry.

The attack came with a silent uprush of shadows that swarmed in from every side, flowing up to the turf ramparts with a speed, an impetus that, ditch or no ditch, must have carried them over into the camp if there had been only the sentries to bar the way. They were flinging brushwood bundles into the ditch to form causeways; swarming over, they had poles to scale the ramparts, but in the dark nothing of that could be seen, only a flowing up and over, like a wave of ghosts. For a few moments the utter silence gave sheer gooseflesh horror to the attack; then the Auxiliaries rose as one man to meet the attackers, and the silence splintered, not into uproar, but into a light smother of sound that rippled along the ramparts: the sound of men fiercely engaged, but without giving tongue. For a moment it endured; and then from the darkness came the strident braying of a British war-horn. From the ramparts a Roman trumpet answered the challenge, as fresh waves of shadows came pouring in to the attack; and then it seemed as if all Tartarus had broken loose. The time for silence was past, and men fought, yelling now; red flame sprang up into the night above the Praetorian gate, and was instantly quenched. Every yard of the ramparts was a reeling, roaring battle-line as the tribesmen swarmed across the breastwork to be met by the grim defenders within.

How long it lasted Marcus never knew, but when the attack drew off, the first cobweb light of a grey and drizzling dawn was creeping over the fort. Marcus and his second-in-command looked at each other, and Marcus asked very softly, "How long can we hold out?"

"For several days, with luck," muttered Drusillus, pretending to adjust the strap of his shield.

"Reinforcements could get to us in three—maybe two—from Durinum," Marcus said. "But there was no reply to our signal."

"Little to wonder in that, sir. To destroy the nearest signal station is an obvious precaution; and no cresset could carry the double distance in this murk."

"Mithras grant it clears enough to give the smoke column a chance to rise."

But there was no sign of anxiety in the face of either of them when they turned from each other an instant later, the older man to go

## *Attack!*

clanging off along the stained and littered rampart walk, Marcus to spring down the steps into the crowded space below. He was a gay figure, his scarlet cloak swirling behind him; he laughed, and made the "thumbs up" to his troops, calling "Well done, lads! We will have breakfast before they come on again!"

The "thumbs up" was returned to him. Men grinned, and here and there a voice called cheerfully in reply, as he disappeared with Centurion Paulus in the direction of the Praetorium.

No one knew how long the breathing space might last; but at the least it meant time to get the wounded under cover, and an issue of raisins and hard bread to the troops. Marcus himself had no breakfast, he had too many other things to do, too many to think about; amongst them the fate of a half Century under Centurion Galba, now out on patrol, and due back before noon. Of course the tribesmen might have dealt with them already, in which case they were beyond help or the need of it, but it was quite as likely that they would merely be left to walk into the trap on their return, and cut to pieces under the very walls of the fort.

Marcus gave orders that the cresset was to be kept alight on the signal-roof; that at least would warn them that something was wrong as soon as they sighted it. He ordered a watch to be kept for them, and sent for Lutorius of the Cavalry and put the situation to him. "If they win back here, we shall of course make a sortie and bring them in. Muster the squadron and hold them in readiness from now on. That is all."

"Sir," said Lutorius. His sulks were forgotten, and he looked almost gay as he went off to carry out the order.

There was nothing more that Marcus could do about his threatened patrol, and he turned to the score of other things that must be seen to.

It was full daylight before the next attack came. Somewhere, a war-horn brayed, and before the wild note died, the tribesmen broke from cover, yelling like fiends out of Tartarus as they swarmed up through the bracken; heading for the gates this time, with tree-trunks to serve as rams, with firebrands that gilded the falling mizzle and flashed on the blade of sword and heron-tufted war spear. On they stormed, heedless of the Roman arrows that thinned their ranks as they came, Marcus, standing in the shooting turret beside the Praetorian gate, saw a figure in their van, a wild figure in streaming

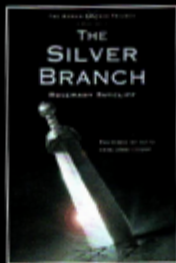
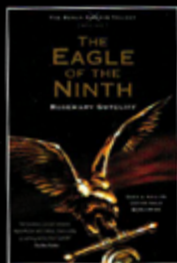
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