

The Eagle of the Ninth Study Guide

The Eagle of the Ninth by Rosemary Sutcliff

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Overview

The Eagle of the Ninth is both a mystery and the story of a young man whose growth to adulthood forces him to acknowledge painful truths about his background and his career. Marcus, a young centurion, begins his service in the Roman army of the second century with dreams of glorious military success and a triumphant return to the Etruscan farm that his family has owned for generations. Instead, he soon confronts feelings of alienation when his mother marries again and he is assigned to far-off Britain. Isolated from his family and country, Marcus must establish his own place and accept the realities of a sometimes harsh world.

The world of first-century Britain is depicted in vivid detail. The contrast between the peace and order of the Roman way of life and that of the Celts, who lived in more direct harmony with nature, is one of the major themes of the novel.

About the Author

Born in West Clanden, Surrey, England, on December 14, 1920, Rosemary Sutcliff was educated privately and traveled widely until she was ten, when her father retired from the navy and the family settled in Devonshire.

When she was young, Sutcliff suffered from an ailment that left her permanently disabled. She lists her interests as painting, needlework, dogs, and travel.

She published her first book, *The Chronicles of Robin Hood*, in 1950 and began a literary career characterized by a wide range of historical fiction for both *The Sword and the Circle: King Arthur and the Knights of the Round* *The Road to Camlann: The Death of adults and children*. She set her next three works in the Renaissance era and then began the trilogy about Roman Britain for which she is best known: *The Eagle of the Ninth*, *The Silver Branch*, and *The Lantern Bearers*. *The Eagle of the Ninth* won the Phoenix Award of the Children's Literature Association in 1985, and *The Lantern Bearers* won the Carnegie Medal for the outstanding children's book of 1959.

Critics most often praise Sutcliff for the accuracy and detail of her historical settings and actions. Careful renderings of dress, food, custom, and place recreate vivid worlds of times past. Many critics have commented on the tragic themes in her books; Sutcliff responded to this in her acceptance speech for the Phoenix Award: "I don't believe one should make allowance for young readers, feed them pap.... Children should be allowed the great themes, which they can receive and make use of better than most adults can."

Plot Summary

The Eagle of the Ninth is a historical novel, the saga of Marcus Flavius Aquila, a young Roman Centurion in Britain about 127 A. D. When Marcus is wounded, he decides to rescue the totem of his father's Lost Legion, the "unlucky Ninth." Accompanied by his faithful Briton retainer and friend Esca, Marcus travels amongst the barbarians disguised as an oculist. The two retrieve the Eagle from an Epidaii tribe and make a mad dash for the safety of Hadrian's Wall, eluding their pursuers by stealth and misdirection. Returning home, Marcus finds his dream of reviving the Ninth shattered, but he is awarded a farm of his own by a grateful Roman Senate. He chooses to remain in Britain among his new family and friends.

As the novel begins, after a wound forces Marcus to leave the Second Roman Legion, Marcus spends time recuperating at the home of his Uncle Aquila. Despite Aquila's assurances that he can remain as long as he likes, Marcus feels the need to build a new life outside the Legions. He meets Cottia, the beautiful young niece of Aquila's pompous next-door neighbor. Marcus is impressed by the valor of a gladiator named Esca, and he buys the man as a personal slave. The two adopt a wolf cub and name it Cub.

When Marcus learns that the Eagle of the Lost Ninth Legion, his father's old command, is being held by Celtic tribesmen, he determines to get it back. Marcus grants Esca his freedom, and Esca agrees to accompany him as a friend. They travel through Scotland with Marcus disguised as a Greek oculist, or eye doctor. When the two men find the Eagle in the Holy Place of the Epidaii, Marcus learns the fate of the Lost Ninth from a deserter and an old Celtic warrior. About one quarter of the Legion, a thousand soldiers, were killed by the tribesmen as they marched north, and half of the remaining force mutinied. The remaining soldiers, lead by Marcus's father, fought bravely but were severely outnumbered. At the end, Marcus's father was the last man alive, bravely struggling to keep the Eagle aloft.

Marcus's hopes that the Ninth Legion will be reformed are dashed. The Senate will never reinstate a Legion with such a dishonorable history. Nevertheless, Marcus refuses to leave the Eagle behind. He steals it, and with Esca, he makes a run for the safety of Hadrian's Wall, five days south. They are pursued by angry tribesmen, and after two narrow escapes, they finally arrive safely with the Eagle. For his bravery, Esca is awarded Roman citizenship by the Senate, and Marcus is given a full pension from the Legion, including land in Etruria or Britain. Marcus chooses to remain in Britain with Cottia and his Uncle Aquila, realizing that is where he truly belongs.

The novel was published in 1954, and according to the author, it is very loosely based on true events. Around 117 A.D., the Ninth Roman Legion, stationed near the present-day city of York in Britain, marched north to suppress an uprising by Caledonian tribes. The Legion was never heard of again. In the early 1900s, a wingless eagle was found near Silchester in England. Sutcliff used her active imagination to combine the two into one fictional account. Modern scholars dispute both of Sutcliff's "facts," asserting that



there is documented history of the Ninth Legion in later years outside Britain and that the eagle statuette was not in fact a legionary eagle. Nevertheless, Sutcliff's narrative remains one of the most riveting historical novels set in ancient Roman times.



Chapter 1 Frontier Fort

Chapter 1 Frontier Fort Summary

The Eagle of the Ninth is the saga of Marcus Flavius Aquila, a young Roman Centurion. When Marcus is wounded, he decides to rescue the totem of his father's Lost Legion, the "unlucky Ninth." Accompanied by his faithful British retainer and friend Esca, Marcus travels amongst the barbarians disguised as an oculist. The two retrieve the Eagle from an Epidauri tribe and make a mad dash for the safety of Hadrian's Wall, eluding their pursuers by stealth and misdirection. Returning home, Marcus finds his dream of reviving the Ninth shattered, but he is awarded a farm of his own by a grateful Roman Senate.

As the first chapter begins, the Auxiliary cohort of the Second Roman Legion marches tirelessly along a modest British road. At the head of the column flies the standard, as yet unadorned with laurels and other honors. The cohort is newly joined, superbly trained but lacking any experience in battle. Its leader is Centurion Marcus Flavius Aquila. The cohort is his first command. Marcus is a dark, thin and arrogant Roman with a brand between his brows, showing he has achieved the Raven degree of Mithras.

Marcus was raised on the family farm in Rome. His father was a Centurion before him. After serving successfully in Judea and Egypt, his father was assigned to command the first cohort of the "unlucky" Ninth Legion. The Legion marched out one day to quell a Caledonian uprising and was never heard of again. Marcus's mother died about a year later, and the boy was sent to live with his uncle, a greedy Roman official who sold the family farm. Marcus has asked to be assigned to Britain, because he hopes to learn something of his father's fate. His father's elder brother, Uncle Aquila, also a former Centurion, has retired to a farm in Britain.

The cohort tops a gentle rise, and they see the tiny British town clustered around the Roman fortress. Marcus greets Quintus Hilarion, the Pilus Prior Centurion he is replacing. Quintus is eager to go on leave, but he does offer Marcus one piece of advice, to beware of the Druids. Although the organized priesthood was destroyed almost 60 years ago, stray holy men still wander the forests. Whenever one appears, he seems to rouse the local villagers and hunters to rebellion. Quintus cautions that the time is ripe for such an uprising, after two years of bad harvests.

Chapter 1 Frontier Fort Analysis

One of the great strengths of the novel is its realistic portrayal of everyday life in Roman Britain about 127 A. D. Marcus is Pilus Prior Centurion of a cohort. Normally cohorts range between 400 and 600 soldiers, with the average being 480. Each cohort is made up of 6 centuries each containing 80 to 100 men, commanded by a Centurion. Marcus's cohort is 600 strong, made up of blond giants from Upper Gaul. His men most likely



come from Switzerland, the Netherlands or the region of Germany on the banks of the Rhine River. Marcus's command is an auxiliary cohort, meaning his soldiers are not Roman citizens but will be granted citizenship upon honorable discharge.

The Legion is the only true home that Marcus has, the only place he feels he really belongs. After the death of his parents and the sale of the family farm in Etruria, Marcus never truly felt comfortable at his uncle's home in Rome. Both were greatly relieved when Marcus was old enough to join the Legion. Like many in the Legion, Marcus is a worshiper of the savior god adapted from the Greek religion. Marcus bears the brand of Mithras between his brows. As a member of the elite cadre of initiates, Marcus practices the secret rites and has achieved the Raven degree.



Chapter 2 Feathers in the Wind

Chapter 2 Feathers in the Wind Summary

The cohort soon settles into life in the frontier camp. All camps are much alike, although in this one a homesick former commander planted a rose bush in a wine jar. Marcus plans to replant the bush when he has the time. Between days of drills, parades and patrols, Marcus finds time to hunt with a Briton guide named Cradoc. Marcus needs the relaxation, since there are rumors of a Druid priest in the villages and a third bad harvest is certain. Cradoc's wife is a tall, dignified but distant beauty with a baby on her hip.

Marcus finds Cradoc tending to his chariot team. The two men make a wager that Marcus cannot drive the spirited quartet. They will settle the matter in a few weeks, when Cradoc returns from a hunting trip to the north. Marcus drives the horses with such skill that even Cradoc must admit that Marcus is a good charioteer. Cradoc pays his wager with a spear. Choosing the hunting spear, Marcus notices that Cradoc has kept one war spear in reserve. Cradoc says that it belonged to his father, but Marcus notices that the heron's feathers decorating the spear are new.

Chapter 2 Feathers in the Wind Analysis

By 127 A.D., the Roman Empire reaches from Britain to Egypt. People of many tribes and clans are included in Rome, and many languages are spoken. Cradoc is a Briton, member of a Celtic tribe. He lives in a round stone hut with a thatched roof and earns his living by hunting. Although the Roman rule is firmly established, the local residents by no means unanimously support the Empire. Marcus's command is at Isca Dumnoniorum, now the city of Exeter in Devon County in southwest England. The town was probably already a Celtic walled city before the Romans captured Britain.

Marcus forms an easy friendship with Cradoc and enjoys hunting wild boar with him, although Cradoc's wife always seems distant. The war spear, with its new heron feathers, foreshadows the battle to come. The chapter title, *Feathers in the Wind*, suggests portents of things to come and the powerlessness of men confronted with fate.



Chapter 3 Attack!

Chapter 3 Attack! Summary

Two nights later, the Duty Centurion wakes Marcus from a sound sleep. He reports noises outside the walls, towards the town. It is only stray cattle, but Marcus is extra cautious, mindful of the Druid in the area, and a new moon to boot. Marcus is well aware that the gods show themselves in new moons, seed-time, harvest and solstice. If an attack comes, it will likely be during at such a time. He orders the Centurion to get the cohort into fighting position as quietly as possible.

In moments, the tribesmen storm the walls, screaming as if all Tartarus has broken loose. Marcus's second in command, Drusillus, assures Marcus the fortress can hold them off for several days until reinforcements arrive from Durinum. However, the older man is worried because the heavy mist prevents the signal fire from being seen. Marcus worries about a half Century patrol. If they return now, they will walk into a trap and be torn to ribbons. Marcus orders a fire to be lighted in the cresset to warn them. He orders a squadron to prepare to rescue the patrol.

The next attack comes in full daylight, and Marcus sees the robed figure of a Druid priest at the head. He orders a Gaul to fire on the man, but the arrow misses. The outpost has lost at least 80 men in the fighting. Finally, the mist lifts a little and they see the smoke of an answering signal fire. Reinforcements will arrive in two or three days from Durinum, the present city of Dorchester.

The patrol can be seen approaching in the distance. Marcus orders 50 of the reserves, the most experienced soldiers, to follow him. Over Centurion Drusillus's objection, Marcus leads them himself. He orders the men to form testudo. They storm the tribesmen, attacking with shouts of "Caesar! Caesar!" They form a new testudo with the patrol, and with the cavalry clearing a path, they return to the fortress gates. Suddenly a column of chariots is upon them, with scythe blades on the wheels, mowing men down. Marcus orders the trumpeter to sound retreat, and the men desperately flee ahead of the chariots.

Marcus is certain the troops are doomed unless someone can delay the chariots' progress. He springs for the lead charioteer, certain that it means his death under the horses' hooves and crushing wheels. Marcus leaps and meets eyes with the charioteer in silent salute. It is Cradoc, his old hunting companion. The two go down together, and Marcus is thrust under the scythe wheels into darkness.

Chapter 3 Attack! Analysis

Normally in a Roman Legion, the reinforcements are the most seasoned veterans. Romans put the youngest, least experienced men in the front lines, with older veterans in the rear. This rewards men for years of service and gives them an incentive to remain



in the Legion. Marcus's cohort is newly formed, so he has few experienced veterans. In the testudo formation, the soldiers create a solid shell of their shields around and atop a square of marching men. The formation is named after a tortoise, for the nearly impenetrable shell it provides. While testudo provides excellent defense against arrows and missiles, it is impossible to launch an attack without breaking the formation. The Romans adapted the gods of many conquered countries, especially their glorious predecessors, the Ancient Greeks. Tartarus is both a deity and a place in the underworld, even lower than Hades, in Greek mythology.

Marcus shows his unquestioning loyalty to his troops by putting his men first. He neglects to eat, as he makes plans for the safe return of the patrol. He insists on leading the expedition to aid the patrol himself, instead of allowing his more experienced second-in-command, Drusillus, to go. Marcus attacks the lead charioteer in a desperate bid to give his men a few moments to get to safety, although it means his almost certain death.



Chapter 4 The Last Rose Falls

Chapter 4 The Last Rose Falls Summary

Marcus is not killed, but he is injured. For a week, he lies in a haze of pain. Finally, he awakes to find the garrison Surgeon, Aulus, bending over him. There is a spear gash in Marcus's shoulder, and his right thigh is shattered, a mass of wounds. Finally the Surgeon allows Drusillus to visit his commander.

Marcus learns that the collapse of the first chariot stopped the others. Both Cradoc and the Druid holy man were killed. The patrol was able to rush inside the fortress with only a few casualties. Marcus declares that the Fourth Gaulish is the finest cohort with the Eagles. The village has been punished in the traditional way. The huts destroyed, and the fields are salted so that there will be no harvest for three years. Marcus thinks all eternity will not bring back the young men of the tribe, and he is surprised by his own sentimentality.

Marcus is offended by the pompous Centurion Ma11mus who leads the reinforcements and assumes temporary command in Marcus's place. Just before his relief command arrives, Marcus learns his time with the Eagles is over. Ma11mus has recommended the cohort for a gilded laurel wreath, their first honor in battle. From the window of his room, Marcus watches the final crimson rose shed its petals. He has had his command for just the length of the rose's bloom.

Chapter 4 The Last Rose Falls Analysis

The Eagle is the symbol of all Roman Legions. Thus, when Marcus says the 4th Gaulish is the finest cohort of all the Eagles, he means of all the Roman Legions. In the days of Pliny the Elder, the Roman Legions had five symbols, the eagle, the wolf, the bull or minotaur, the horse and the boar. During the reorganization of the Legions under Marius about 104 B.C., the four animals were eliminated, and every Legion was symbolized by a silver or bronze eagle with outstretched wings. Another important symbol is the red rose, which symbolizes blood and honor. When it falls, Marcus is reminded how fleeting life is and how important bravery and honor are.

Once Marcus loses his place in the Legion, he belongs nowhere. He can no longer hope to one day command a Legion or to buy back the family farm in Etruria. He has no money or prospects, is lame and must leave all his friends and brothers in arms. The Legion is the only true home Marcus has known since his mother died when he was eleven years old. Marcus's last name, Aquila, means Eagle, symbolizing the central importance of the Legion to his very e11stence.



Chapter 5 Saturnalia Games

Chapter 5 Saturnalia Games Summary

Marcus has never met his Uncle Aquila, although the man wrote in the past to vaguely invite Marcus to spend his leave on the farm in Calleva. His uncle is a retired Legionnaire, a former camp commandant. By late fall, Marcus has joined the household. The doctor tells Marcus to be patient and that his injuries will heal. Uncle Aquila assures Marcus that he can remain as long as he likes, but Marcus is impatient to be moving about. For Marcus, the endless boredom is relieved only when news arrives from the Second Legion. Marcus is surprised to learn that he has been awarded a gold military bracelet for heroism. It is inscribed *Pia Fidelis* and carries the Capricorn insignia of the Second. Marcus is even more pleased to learn that the Fourth Gaulish cohort has been awarded a gilded laurel wreath for bravery, to be carried in parade.

Uncle Aquila sees that his nephew is restive, and he suggests they attend the Saturnalia Games. At the games, Marcus notices a young red-haired British girl with her family. Uncle Aquila identifies them as his neighbors, a magistrate named Kaeso, his wife and their beautiful young niece. Marcus is intrigued by the bear baiting and gladiator contests, especially a fight to the death between two men. The two are unevenly matched. One carries a sword and buckler, while the other is a Greek called the Fisher, with a net and three-pronged spear. Marcus well knows that the net is an insidious weapon, immobilizing a man. It is no wonder that the slave with the sword looks frightened. The swordsman fights bravely, and when he inevitably loses, he refuses to beg the crowd for his life. Marcus is impressed by the man's valor and gives the man the thumbs up. The crowd takes up the gesture, and the swordsman's life is spared.

That night over the draughts game, Marcus asks Uncle Aquila what will become of the young gladiator. Aquila replies that he will likely be sold, since no one wants to watch a defeated gladiator. When Marcus muses aloud about buying the man, Uncle Aquila replies, "I am somewhat at a loss to understand why you should wish to keep a tame gladiator. Why not try a wolf instead?"

Chapter 5 Saturnalia Games Analysis

Marcus is honored not just for bravery in battle, but for fidelity and loyalty to his Legion. *Pia Fidelis* is the official motto and nickname of the Second Legion, meaning forever faithful and loyal. Uncle Aquila's farm in Calleva is in the present-day Silchester, England. Marcus is desperately homesick for the Legion and for his home in Etruria, the beautiful, hilly region of vineyards in modern-day Tuscany. The men while away the evenings playing draughts, or checkers. Saturnalia is the feast when Romans celebrated the dedication of the temple of Saturn. It is a week-long festival from December 17 to December 23, coinciding with the Winter Solstice. The Calleva



Saturnalia is much less elaborate than that at the Roman Coliseum, but still entertaining. Following the Roman tradition, the crowd decides the fate of defeated gladiators. A thumbs-down gesture indicates disapproval, and the man is killed by his opponent. A thumbs-up gesture rewards those who have fought especially bravely, and they are allowed to live.

Uncle Aquila's sentiments about keeping a tame gladiator are both humorous and ironic in light of future events, when Marcus does indeed adopt a wolf cub. They also foreshadow the adventures to come, as Marcus will not readily accept an inactive life. This quest symbolizes Marcus's need to forge his own destiny and find a place where he truly belongs, as well as his desire to avenge the honor of the Lost Ninth Legion.



Chapter 6 Esca

Chapter 6 Esca Summary

Esca is a Brigante warrior who has been a slave only two years. Marcus introduces himself as a former Centurion with the Second Legion. Esca admits he considered escaping, but he swears loyalty to Marcus, saying, "I am the Centurion's hound, to lie at the Centurion's feet." As Marcus's personal body slave, Esca carries a spear and stands behind Marcus's chair during meals.

Marcus allows Esca to join a wolf hunt, although Marcus's injuries still keep him from participating. Wolves have been decimating the local flocks, and a few have even attacked children. Soldiers and villagers have banded together to kill them. Esca returns the next morning with a tiny wolf cub, orphaned by the hunt. A young Tribune at the hunt, Placidus, has insulted Esca, saying he hunts well "for a slave." Marcus protests that he thinks of Esca more as a friend than a slave.

Marcus learns that Esca was his father's charioteer before he was enslaved. As Chieftain of the Brigantes, his father commanded 500 warriors. When Esca had been a warrior for a year, the clan rose against their overlords. The tribe was defeated, and the few survivors were sold as slaves. Esca's father, mother and brothers were all killed. Esca swears that he would have fought to the death, but he was lying unconscious in a ditch when he was captured. Reminiscing about his childhood, Esca tells of seeing a Roman Legion march north when he was about nine or ten years old. The column of men seemed endless. Esca was impressed by the flashing bronze eagle standard carried on a pole in the front. The men marched north, but they never came back. As soon as Marcus hears the story, he realizes the Legion was his father's own, the infamous Lost Ninth.

Chapter 6 Esca Analysis

One of the reasons Marcus so admires Esca's bout with Fisher is the slave's obvious fear. Despite his terror, the man fights bravely and refuses to beg for mercy from the crowd. The qualities of courage, dignity and loyalty to a code of honor are keys to Marcus's character, as well. Yet, the two men are natural enemies. Esca is exactly the type of tribesman Marcus was fighting when he was wounded.

A continuing theme within *The Eagle of the Ninth* is the connection between the Roman Empire and the British Empire. The greatest period of Colonial Britain had already passed when the novel was written, just as the glories of the Roman Empire were merely memories. One way the author, Rosemary Sutcliff, establishes a connection is the slave Esca's immediate and rather inexplicable loyalty to the Roman Centurion. This scene carries an aura of colonialism, as the "uncivilized" tribesman immediately



recognizes the moral, cultural and intellectual superiority of an invading people and willingly, even fervently, submits.

The wolf cub symbolizes the struggle of each of us to tame the savage impulses within in order to belong to the civilized world. Both Esca and Marcus face that challenge, as former warriors who must conform to a pastoral life. Despite Marcus's protests, the bitter truth is that Esca is a slave.



Chapter 7 Two Worlds Meet

Chapter 7 Two Worlds Meet Summary

Enjoying Uncle Aquila's garden with the wolf cub, Marcus is surprised to see a slender girl of about thirteen peering over the hedge. Her face is pointed like a fox, and she greets Marcus in stilted Latin. Her name is Cottia, and her father was a horse breeder of the Iceni. He was killed while breaking a young stallion. When her mother remarried, she sent Cottia to live with her childless aunt and uncle. Her aunt and uncle are pretentious and try to make Cottia act like a Roman maiden, even having her speak Latin at home and calling her Camilla. Like Marcus, Cottia has fond childhood memories of the family farm. She longs to be in a place where she can acknowledge her proud Iceni heritage. Cottia makes friends with the tiny wolf, named Cub. When she becomes chilled in the spring air, Marcus lends the girl his heavy red military cloak. Cottia seems disappointed when her nurse calls her away.

After Cottia's departure, Esca and Marcus fall into a debate. Marcus argues that Rome has brought many good things to the British isles, like order, justice and good roads. Esca argues that the price has been too high. He shows Marcus a Celtic shield boss, with a pattern that flows like wind and stars across the front. Esca contrasts it with the neat, orderly embossed decoration of Marcus's own dagger sheath. Marcus understands that the two represent two different worlds. He hopes that with Esca and Cottia, he will be able to bridge the gap between them.

Chapter 7 Two Worlds Meet Analysis

Cottia is searching for her place in the world like Marcus, Esca and even Cub. Each is young and struggling to find a place where he or she belongs. Cottia's father was a proud member of the Iceni, a southern tribe that revolted against the Romans about sixty years before. In finding their places, Cottia and Marcus each face slightly different conflicts. Cottia hates her pretentious aunt and uncle and longs for a home of her own, where she can acknowledge her Iceni heritage.

While Marcus, Esca and Cub struggle against aggressive and violent natures, Cottia has tender sensibilities and can barely stand to witness the gladiator contests. This portrait of frail, sensitive womanhood as the bearer of family morals and the sole civilizing influence is a distinctive feature of the 1950s, when *The Eagle of the Ninth* was published.

The dagger sheath symbolizes the Roman way of life. It is a well-ordered, conventional and moderately comfortable existence that demands absolute conformity. The shield boss symbolizes the life of the Celtic tribesmen, free, in tune with natural rhythms and expressive, if sometimes uncertain. Marcus realizes that the two represent very different worlds, which are unlikely ever to peacefully coexist. This comparison evokes a major

conflict of the novel, the clash of cultures between the Roman Empire and the Celtic tribes.



Chapter 8 The Healer with the Knife

Chapter 8 The Healer with the Knife Summary

Three days pass before Cottia is able to return to the garden. She confesses that Aunt Valaria insists properly brought up young Roman maidens do not visit strangers. Marcus urges his uncle to be friendlier to his neighbors so that he can see Cottia more often. Uncle Aquila reluctantly complies, although he has little regard for the pompous magistrate and his wife. Despite his protests, Uncle Aquila is obviously fond of Marcus. When Marcus stoically denies the pain in his leg, Uncle Aquila calls him a liar.

Uncle Aquila is concerned that after almost a year, Marcus's leg is still not healed. He calls an old friend, Rufus Galarius, to treat the wound. Galarius is a former surgeon with the Second Legion. He proclaims that there are bits of wood in the wound that will have to be removed with painful surgery. Cottia hears about the impending surgery from her nurse's gossip. She insists that Marcus send Esca to tell her as soon as the surgery is safely completed. After the surgery, Marcus sees Esca's pinched face and jokingly asks him, "Was it as bad as all that?" Esca tells him to go back to sleep, while the slave tends to Cub and Cottia.

Chapter 8 The Healer with the Knife Analysis

On the eve of Marcus's surgery, Marcus is grateful for the friendship of Esca, Cottia and Cub. With no money and no job, Marcus is still worried about finding his way in the world, but he realizes that he is no longer lonely. Esca's friendship with Marcus is deepening, evidenced when he is more concerned about the surgery than the unconscious Marcus is, and he insists on personally caring for his master.



Chapter 9 Tribune Placidus

Chapter 9 Tribune Placidus Summary

Marcus and Esca release Cub into the forest. Marcus takes off the wolf's collar and puts it in his pocket. Now that the wolf cub is fully grown, it is only fair to free him into the wild amongst his own kind. If he returns home on his own, then it will be the wolf's choice to remain with men.

Marcus's leg is healed now. It is twisted and scarred, but he can use it almost as well as ever. Still without prospects, Marcus is thinking of working as a rich man's secretary. His uncle is expecting a dinner guest, the Legate of the Sixth Legion, a former comrade at arms, Claudius Hieronimianus. With the old soldier is a member of his staff, Tribune Servius Placidus. Marcus recognizes the youth, with skin as supple as a girl's, from Esca's description. It is the Tribune who was rude to Esca the day of the wolf hunt. Just as Marcus is speaking with the arrogant young noble Tribune, Cub enters the room.

Chapter 9 Tribune Placidus Analysis

Placidus is condescending until he learns that Marcus is a hero of the Second Legion. Placidus continues to berate Esca, calling him a painted barbarian. For his own part, Marcus is contemptuous of Placidus. As a well-born Roman noble, Placidus is serving his compulsory time as a soldier before taking his place in the Senate. Professional soldiers such as Marcus have little respect for his type, although the nobles often outrank them.

Cub's return is especially symbolic. Although he is a wild beast by heritage, Cub has chosen to return to Marcus from affection, rather than remain in the forest among his own kind. Cub has overcome his darker impulses to forge strong friendships and a new life, finding a place where he belongs. Now it only remains for Marcus, Esca and Cottia to do the same. Cub's devotion to Marcus foreshadows Esca's own loyalty.



Chapter 10 Marching Orders

Chapter 10 Marching Orders Summary

After dinner, the Legate mentions that Eburacum is still haunted by the disappearance of the "unlucky Ninth." Marcus mentions that his father was First Cohort, second in command of the legion. Placidus sneers that the men probably just killed their officers and deserted. The Legate has heard a rumor that one of the northern Celtic tribes keeps the Hispana's Eagle on display. He fears that in another uprising, the Eagle would be a powerful totem against the Romans. The Legate opines that the Hispana must have been ambushed for the Eagle to lose its wings and fall into enemy hands. If the soldiers had merely deserted, he reasons, they would have destroyed it.

The Legate quotes an old motto "Eagle lost - honour lost; honour lost - all lost." Marcus hopes that if the Eagle could be found and returned, the Second Legion might be reformed. The Legate regrets that he has no one with sufficient knowledge of the Northern Tribes to send to retrieve the Eagle. Marcus urges the Legate to send him. Esca agrees to help by acting as guide. Marcus will pose as a traveling oculist, an itinerate eye doctor. Placidus is doubtful, saying he would not have his life depend on a slave's loyalty.

That night Marcus presents Esca with manumission papers, freeing him from slavery. Esca is grateful, and as a free man, he agrees to accompany Marcus on his quest. Cottia urges Marcus to let someone else go after the Eagle. Marcus explains that the Eagle is the essence of the Legion. Even if only a handful of the Legion's 4,000 soldiers survive, with the Eagle they are whole. If the Eagle is lost, the Legion is dishonored and can never be rebuilt.

Chapter 10 Marching Orders Analysis

The Sixth Legion is based at Eburacum, the site of the present-day city of York. The Eagle symbolizes the honor of the Roman Legions. Strong, powerful and unmerciful, the bird of prey represents both the best and worst of Roman military might. Wingless and fallen into the hands of Druids or tribesmen, it is a powerful emblem of defeat. Protecting their Eagle was a potent rallying point for Romans soldiers. Some standards bearers were even known to rush into battle, forcing their more cautious cohort to follow them to protect the almost sacred Eagle.

Like Cub, when Esca is given his freedom he remains with Marcus. With his family dead and village destroyed, Esca has nowhere that he belongs. His friendship with Marcus is the strongest force in his life at this point. Marcus himself is searching for the indefinable sense of home and a purpose in life. Again, Sutcliff evokes the ethos of the British Empire, suggesting that a life of menial servitude to a presumable superior culture is preferable to a simple life of freedom.



Just as Esca and Cub are loyal to Marcus, the Centurion is loyal to the Legion and to the memory of his father. Marcus is almost certain that the Hispana under his father's leadership would have fought bravely. He longs to avenge his father's honor and learn the circumstances of the deadly ambush that must surely have felled such a powerful force so far from home.



Chapter 11 Across the Frontier

Chapter 11 Across the Frontier Summary

Hadrian's Wall runs from Luguvallium to Segedunum, bisecting the country. Marcus and Esca pass through the gate on an early summer morning, mounted on small, sturdy ex-cavalry mares. Esca has returned to his native Briton dress. Marcus is disguised as an oculist in a purple cape. A silver talisman covers the scar of Mithras on his forehead, and a sign advertises the Invincible Anodyne of Demetrius of Alexandria, a certain cure for all diseases of the eye. Marcus's disguise is not entirely a sham. In their packs are salves for eye afflictions, supplied by Uncle Aquila's physician friend, Rufus Galarius.

With Chilurnium well behind them, the two men pause for a mid-day rest, although following the tradition of the Legions and hunters, they eat nothing. The two plan to crisscross the land beyond Hadrian's Wall until they learn something of the Eagle and the fate of the Ninth Legion. While they rest, Marcus builds a small altar to Mithras. Marcus has a tiny bird he carved from olive wood at home in Etruria. He has carried it for years. He makes a fire on the altar and sets the bird in it, as if it were sitting on a nest.

Chapter 11 Across the Frontier Analysis

The two men cross Hadrian's Wall, a heavily guarded 120-kilometer stone wall stretching from Carlisle to Wallsend, separating Roman Britain from the "barbarians" of the north, the former Roman Province of Valentia (the Scottish lowlands) and Caledonia (the Scottish highlands.) The Wall, a feat of engineering, is a symbol of the power and majesty of the Roman Empire. It is also a real source of security and protection for Marcus and Esca. Leaving it means they are without protection in their travels. In burning the bird he carved from a Tuscan olive branch, Marcus is symbolically leaving the world of his childhood behind to pursue his own destiny.

Esca proves his loyalty to his former owner by traveling with Marcus in native dress. Esca's guidance and wisdom will prove crucial in their exploits. The man could easily return to his clan, the Painted People or Dumnoni, but he chooses to remain loyal to Marcus instead. At least for the present, Esca has decided that he belongs with his master, although Marcus may still be searching for his place in the world.



Chapter 12 The Whistler in the Dawn

Chapter 12 The Whistler in the Dawn Summary

All summer Marcus and Esca crisscross the Province of Valentia, treating eyes as they go. In late summer, near Trinomontium, they see the charging boar of the Twentieth Legion carved into a block of stone at a deserted fortress. The next morning, they hear an eerie whistling. It is a marching song popular with the legions, and at first both men think they are hearing a ghost. Soon, however, they hear a man singing, "Oh when I joined the Eagles, (as it might be yesterday), I kissed a girl at Clusium, Before I marched away" in Latin. A man dressed as one of the Painted People, leading a shaggy pony, strides into view. The stranger stops short on seeing Marcus and Esca. He is unfriendly and doesn't even offer to share meat, although he has a freshly killed deer on his pony.

The man wears only an ochre kilt. His name is Guern the Hunter. He has the brand of Mithras between his brows, as Marcus does. The man says he learned the song from the soldiers and speaks halting Latin. When Marcus and Esca share their camp with him, the hunter invites them to come home with him.

Chapter 12 The Whistler in the Dawn Analysis

The men continue to travel through southern Scotland. Guern's knowledge of Latin and his chin strap scar prove he is a former member of the Roman Legion. Like every army, the Legion has distinctive marching songs. Guern is whistling one of the most enduring. The brand of Mithras between Guern's brows also betrays his service in the Legion. Although Guern is a traitor to the Legion, he proves to be a loyal friend. Marcus seems willing to accept Guern at face value without condemnation. In his own quest for belonging, Marcus seems to accept that Guern has found his place, even if it meant leaving the Legion.



Chapter 13 The Lost Legion

Chapter 13 The Lost Legion Summary

Marcus and Esca accompany Guern to his home, a few turf huts scattered on the moors. There they remain for several days. While Guern is shaving, Marcus sees the scar from the chin strap of a Roman helmet under his chin. Marcus is sure the man is a former Legionnaire, possibly a member of the Lost Ninth Legion. When Marcus shows the man his own brand of Mithras, Guern admits he was a member of the Roman Legion. Guern recognizes the bearded man as the son of his old Cohort Commander. In his turn, Marcus admits that he is not an eye doctor, although his salves are real medicine.

Under Marcus's prompting, Guern shares what he knows of the fate of the Ninth Legion. Guern traces the Legion's bad luck to the day they dispossessed Boudicca, the Queen of the Iceni. Boudicca cursed the Legion before poisoning herself. The Ninth lost many men in the rising that followed. Over the years, various misfortunes befell the Ninth, and it became difficult to find recruits. The commanders were forced to lower their standards in order to keep the Legion near full strength. Several cohorts were serving in Germany, so the Legion was less than 4,000 strong when it marched north, harried by tribesmen all the way. By the time they reached Agricola's ancient headquarters on the Wall, another thousand had been killed. After a brutal attack by the tribesmen, the soldiers sent a spokesman to their own Legate.

The Legate had no battle experience and refused to listen to those who did. The men pleaded to come to terms with the Painted People, but the proud, arrogant Legate refused. More than half of the men mutinied, but Guern remained loyal. Suddenly, the Legate reversed his tactics, and instead of cursing the men, he offered to reconcile with them. Facing decimation, the rebels fought the Legion, killing the Legate. The tribesmen swarmed over the walls and threw themselves into the fighting. By dawn, there were barely two cohorts left. Many of the survivors had fled with the tribesman, to build lives among the Celtic tribes.

Just after dawn, the First Cohort Commander, Marcus's father, called everyone together. They agreed to fight their way out of the old fort and return the Eagle to Eburacum. They hoped that if they succeeded, the Senate would not rule the Legion disgraced. All night the tribesmen howled at the moon outside the fortress walls. The tribes hunted the Legion all the way south. Finally, Guern was injured and let the Legion go on without him. He was cared for by a girl named Murna and married her when he recovered.

A few nights after deserting, Guern saw a group of Epidarii tribesmen carry the captured Eagle north in a triumphant torch procession. Guern offers to accompany Marcus on his quest for the Eagle, but Marcus assures him that he has Esca. On a journey like this, the fewer men you have, the better.



Chapter 13 The Lost Legion Analysis

Guern reveals that one reason he eventually left the Legion was the prospect of decimation. Decimation was a form of punishment used in the Roman Legions to ensure conformity. In a disgraced Legion, every man would draw pieces of paper from a helmet. One of every ten would be designated to die horribly, sentenced to be stoned to death by their comrades. Decimation was a system of punishing the entire cohort or Legion for the sins of a few. Even those who remained loyal to the Legion risked death if their comrades failed.

Decimation created a more cohesive team by increasing mutual dependence. To avoid decimation, much peer pressure was brought into play against anyone who showed the slightest sign of cowardice or mutiny. Legions could be ruled dishonored and decimated by order of the Senate for many infractions, including cowardice, loyalty to the wrong political contender or performing poorly in battle. The innocent were punished along with the guilty. The fact that the sentence was carried out savagely by their comrades merely made decimation worse.

Marcus is discouraged to realize that his father's Legion harbored so many traitors. Even if the Eagle is recovered, the Ninth Legion is disgraced and will never be reformed. Still, Marcus is determined to capture the Eagle and return it, lest it be used against the Roman Legions in the future. The tiny loyal nucleus of the Ninth Legion deserves that much, at least. Marcus remains loyal to the Legions and to his father's memory, even when others are not.



Chapter 14 The Feast of the New Spears

Chapter 14 The Feast of the New Spears Summary

After a month of searching among Epidaii villages, Marcus is discouraged. The Epidaii have made a holy place wherever the Ancient People, the little Dark People, left a barrow. It seems he will never find the Eagle. Along the trail, they encounter an Epidaii Chieftain named Dergdian, who invites them to share his home for a few days. The Chieftain's toddler son has an eye infection, which Marcus cures. Marcus is careful not to offend the Chieftain's father, who dolefully predicts the boy will be blind. Grateful, Dergdian invites Marcus and Esca to attend the Feast of the New Spears in a few days. He reveals that his clan is the Seal People, the keepers of the Holy Place.

Marcus and Esca attend the festival, held at the new moon. There, boys being initiated into manhood are secluded for a day and then given their first spears. The festival is attended by many tribesmen from other villages and by traders and entertainers. A huge dance is held in celebration. There is a procession, with men dressed as a seal, a swan, a badger and a deer. The last man in the procession is carrying a roman eagle. The wings have been broken off, but it is unmistakably the Eagle of the Lost Ninth Legion.

Chapter 14 The Feast of the New Spears Analysis

The Epidaii worship the Horned One, an antlered god also known as Cernumanos, who is similar to the god worshiped by members of the modern Wicca faith. The Horned One is the deified spirit of male animals, especially those with horns. It was associated with prosperity and fertility. In the Epidaii rite of manhood, young men about sixteen years of age were secluded for a day, undergoing mysterious rites. They returned to the village in a procession and are presented with spears to acknowledge their new manhood, as hunters and warriors.

The Eagle is recognized by the tribes, as well as the Romans, as a potent symbol of power and dominion. Marcus and the Legate fear that in the Epidaii's hands, the Eagle will become a rallying point for the overthrow of Roman rule. Thus, both cultures recognize the potency of this symbol, although they practice different religions.



Chapter 15 Venture into the Dark

Chapter 15 Venture into the Dark Summary

After the dance, Marcus asks an old man of the tribe, the Chieftain's father, to tell him about the Eagle. The old warrior tells how they hunted down the remnants of the Ninth Legion, whom he calls the Red Crests because of their headgear. The Red Crests fought bravely, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. The old man himself brought down the man who held the Eagle. Before the Eagle could fall to the ground, the Cohort Commander, Marcus's father, caught it. He was soon killed by another warrior, and the Eagle was captured.

The old warrior remarks on Marcus's resemblance to the Cohort Commander, but Marcus makes an excuse for it. The old man shows Marcus a ring he took from the Legion commander. Marcus recognizes his father's signet ring. It has a large, flawed emerald and the dolphin badge of his family.

Marcus has already prepared the way by telling the villagers he and Esca will depart a day after the Feast of the New Spears. In the wee hours of the morning after the feast, while the entire village is asleep, Marcus and Esca creep out of the hut. They sneak into the barrow where the clan keeps the Holy Cs. Careful not to disturb the relics there, Marcus takes the Eagle. Esca uses a branch to erase their footprints from the earthen floor as the two men exit. Quickly the two men mount up and make their escape.

Chapter 15 Venture into the Dark Analysis

The Celtic rite of manhood is similar to other celebrations in many cultures. The boys are isolated for a day or more and return to assume their places in the clan as men, receiving their new spears. There is a parallel between their situation and Marcus's. In his own way, Marcus's quest is a search for his place in the world. It is a true quest in the sense that this journey will change Marcus, as well as cause him to travel over long distances. Marcus is respectful of the Epidauri's religious artifacts, but he is determined to recover the honor of the Ninth Legion, and his father, by returning the Eagle.



Chapter 16 The Ring-Brooch

Chapter 16 The Ring-Brooch Summary

After traveling for some distance, Esca and Marcus stop beside a river. Esca conceals the Eagle in a hollow on the riverbank, accessible only from the water. It is completely hidden there. The two ride back to the Dun, arriving just before dawn. They curl up beside the fire as always. A few hours later they take their leave of the village.

When the villagers catch up with them, it is almost evening. The villagers accuse the two of stealing the Eagle, which Marcus denies. The Chieftain searches their belongings and finds nothing. In the process, the bronze ring-brooch on Marcus's purple cloak is loosened. The tribesmen still clamor for their blood, but Dergdian says one of the traders attending the feast must have taken the Eagle.

Marcus and Esca travel on to a village, where Esca feigns illness. The villagers, who fear contamination, give them a secluded hut to use. Marcus pretends to nurse a feverish patient while Esca quickly journeys back to the river and retrieves the Eagle, wrapping it in Marcus's purple cloak. When Esca returns, he feigns a miraculous recovery, and the two men quickly leave the village.

After hard traveling all day, Marcus unwraps the Eagle to admire it by firelight. Esca notices that the bronze ring-brooch is missing. He is certain it has fallen out on the riverbank and that their deception will soon be discovered. They are still five days hard ride from the safety of Hadrian's Wall, certain to be overtaken by the tribesmen before they reach it.

Esca suggests a ruse. He will tell the tribesmen that the two fought over the stolen Eagle. Esca will tell the Epidaii that he drowned Marcus in the river, and the Eagle went with him. The tribesmen will surely kill Esca, but it will delay them long enough for Marcus to return to the safety of the south. Marcus refuses to allow Esca to sacrifice himself, saying they are in this together.

Chapter 16 The Ring-Brooch Analysis

Esca proves his loyalty to Marcus by offering to die in his place. Esca is a member of the Painted People, enemies of the Roman Legions. His entire family was killed fighting for their freedom against the Roman Empire. Yet, Esca has found in Marcus, a young Roman Centurion, the closest friendship. His love and loyalty for Marcus are so great that Esca is willing to abandon the remnants of his clan and die for Marcus. Again, Sutcliff uses Esca's plight to suggest that the under classes were born to sacrifice themselves on behalf of the rulers, in Britain as well as in the Roman Empire.



Chapter 17 The Wild Hunt

Chapter 17 The Wild Hunt Summary

The next morning Esca sells their horses in Cluta. As sturdy and reliable as the ex-cavalry horses have proved, they are too easily identified. Instead Esca brings back two shaggy local ponies. The pair travels swiftly for two days. The third morning, they sight riders with hounds behind them. Soon the tribesmen are practically upon them.

Marcus and Esca elude their pursuers by slipping into a glen on foot while sending their ponies on. They slip into a river to elude the dogs. At the end of a very long day, the two men stumble out of the river, bone-tired and starving. All of their food was in the pony's packs. They sit silently, not daring to light a fire. Soon they hear whistling from the glen, coming towards them. It is Guern, whistling his favorite marching song about the girl at Clusium.

Chapter 17 The Wild Hunt Analysis

Esca is able to go where Marcus cannot. As a native Briton, he slips into a nearby village and sells the ex-cavalry ponies. The horses' distinctive markings will betray the men, if they keep the horses. Marcus is learning to rely on the Celtic tribesman as much as he did his Legion commanders. Without Esca's loyalty and bravery, the two would surely be lost. As it is, they barely survive.



Chapter 18 The Waters of Lethe

Chapter 18 The Waters of Lethe Summary

Guern greets Marcus enthusiastically. He has already heard the news that they have stolen the Eagle from the Epidaii. The Dumnonii and Guern's own tribe will join the battle to return the Eagle to the tribes. Over Marcus's objections that it is too dangerous, Guern offers his help. Guern leads the men across a dangerous bog full of quicksand, where their pursuers cannot follow. Finally, they reach solid ground. Guern can lead them no further, but he asks to see the Eagle one last time before they leave. Marcus salutes the man when they leave, calling him "Centurion" one last time.

Two days later, on foot, the two men are still a long way from Hadrian's Wall. Again they are pursued by horsemen, although Marcus is relieved to see that there are no hounds this time. Marcus and Esca take refuge in an old Roman signal tower. If they are discovered, at least here they can put up a fight, although they are outnumbered. As the two enter the tower, they startle a raven. The bird takes flight, announcing their presence to anyone who cares to look. Three horsemen see the raven and spur their mounts towards the tower.

Chapter 18 The Waters of Lethe Analysis

The chapter title refers to Guern's remark that once someone has drunk the waters of Lethe, there is no going back. In an example of the Roman appropriation of Greek symbols of power and empire, both men are familiar with the River Lethe in Greek mythology. Lethe is the river of Hades. Anyone who drinks of it is granted immediate forgetfulness and concealment from their enemies. In crossing from one life to another, Guern has metaphorically drunk of the waters of Lethe and cannot now return to his previous life.

Although Guern's tribe seeks to keep the Eagle, Guern is a legionnaire first and helps Marcus escape with the treasure. Despite his divided loyalties, the former soldier does all he can to protect the Eagle and the honor of the Ninth Legion. Marcus urges Guern to return with them, but Guern is afraid he will be killed as a traitor. Under Roman law, deserters were stoned to death by members of the Legion. Guern is also unwilling to leave his wife and family.

In the signal tower, all seems lost. Marcus is fully prepared to throw the Eagle into the nearby river and have it lost forever, rather than have the tribes use it against the Legions in the future. Marcus thinks that he is glad to have had this experience with Esca, even if they are killed. In searching for the Eagle, Marcus has forged a new set of loyalties for himself. He is secure that he belongs in his friendship with Esca, regardless of the outcome.



Chapter 19 Tradui's Gift

Chapter 19 Tradui's Gift Summary

Esca draws his knife, but Marcus urges him not to kill the three tribesmen unless he has to. Springing a surprise attack, Marcus and Esca are able to overpower all three men and tie them up. All of the tribesmen are very young. Marcus recognizes one of the men, an Epidaii named Liathan. Esca gags the other two. Marcus forces Liathan to shout that the tower is empty. The other pursuers go on to search a nearby wood.

Liathan gives Marcus his father's signet ring with the huge, flawed emerald. The old warrior has realized Marcus is the Cohort Commander's son and sent the ring to him. If Liathan had captured Marcus and killed him, his instructions were to bury the ring with him. Marcus and Esca take the tribesmen's two best ponies. They leave the trio tied but not gagged, so that they can call for help.

After a long, hard ride, the two men arrive at the gate of Borcovicus, near the modern village of Housesteads. The two wild, bearded men demanding entry in Caesar's name are filthy. The sentry is amazed when they demand to see his commander. Marcus is delighted to discover the commander is Drusillus, his old second with the Legion. Marcus is so tired and weak that he can barely show the man the Eagle before he collapses.

Chapter 19 Tradui's Gift Analysis

When Liathan accuses Marcus of deception, Marcus points out that the Eagle belonged to the Legions first and was stolen by the tribesmen. He tells the man that he is avenging his father's honor. Marcus instinctively realizes that this argument will carry greater weight with the family-oriented clans than the fact that he is acting on the Legates orders, or out of a sense of adventure to avenge the honor of the Legions. At its essence, Marcus's loyalty to the Legions and to his father is the same thing. Both Marcus and his father were legionaries first and men second. Marcus can imagine no life that is worth living if he does not try to win the Eagle back.

The second important talisman in Marcus's life is the signet ring. It symbolizes his father's personal honor, love for his family and loyalty to them. In receiving it, Marcus has a permanent token of his father's love and heritage. In unselfishly pursuing his quest to recover the honor of the Lost Ninth Legion, Marcus has uncovered his own destiny.



Chapter 20 Valedictory

Chapter 20 Valedictory Summary

Marcus and Esca return to Calleva in late October. By chance, the Legate of the Second Legion is visiting again, as well. Esca hesitates to join the men but finally agrees. The Legate is happy to hear the rumors about the Eagle's return confirmed. Marcus is disappointed when the Legate tells him the Ninth Legion is too disgraced to ever be reformed, even if the Eagle were returned to Rome. Marcus is satisfied to have salvaged the Legion's honor with the story of their last courageous battle against the tribesmen.

The Legate suggests that the Eagle be buried, and he, Marcus and Esca conceal it in a hidden chamber in Uncle Aquila's house. The Legate puts it away with these words: "Here lies the Eagle of the Ninth Legions, the Hispana. Many times it found honor in the wars, against foes abroad and rebellion at home. Shame came to it; but at the end it was honorably held until the last of those who held it died beneath its wings. It has led brave me. Let it lie forgotten."

Cub is skeletally thin. In Marcus's absence, the wolf would accept food only from Cottia. The girl's aunt took her to the spa at Aquae Sulis for the winter, and the wolf has not eaten in the days since.

Chapter 20 Valedictory Analysis

Cub has shown his loyalty and love by refusing to eat unless Cottia or Marcus feed him. Back in territory under Roman control, Esca feels intensely the burden of being a former slave, forever marked by the clipped ear. Esca's status has been permanently diminished, and no one will ever assume he is a free man again. The author seems to suggest that slavery is a necessary element of an empire. Marcus urges his friend to put the past behind him. In this passage, Sutcliffe seems to minimize the significance of the subjugation of individuals and by extension, of nations by the British Empire.



Chapter 21 The Olive-wood Bird

Chapter 21 The Olive-wood Bird Summary

That winter is not easy for Marcus. His leg aches from the overwork of the long journey, and Cottia is away all winter. There is still the issue of Marcus's future to be decided. He considers becoming a wealthy man's secretary again. Regardless, Esca pledges to remain with Marcus. Cottia finally returns, looking grown up and more beautiful than ever. Cottia begs Marcus to take her with him, whatever his future brings.

A horseman arrives with a message for Marcus, a papyrus roll. With amazement and delight Marcus learns that the Senate has made Esca a Roman citizen. Marcus has been retired from the Legion with a full pension. He is to be paid part in cash and part in land. The Senate will deed him a farm in Etruria or in Britain if he prefers. Despite his long-held dream to return home, Marcus realizes that his place is here, with his uncle and Cottia. In searching for the Eagle, Marcus has found a place where he belongs.

Chapter 21 The Olive-wood Bird Analysis

Esca swears undying loyalty to Marcus, offering to serve him for life with little or no recompense. Again Sutcliff seems to imply that certain people are born into the servant class and exist only to be loyal to their superiors. Members of the Celtic tribes are presumably such people, in Sutcliff's eyes. This somewhat arrogant view justifies the many British colonies of the 19th century, as well as the Roman Empire. Apparently the greatest prize a colonial can grasp is the Senate's reward to Esca, citizenship in the empire.

Marcus learns that loyalty to Rome and to the Legion is important, but so is loyalty to your friends and family. The tiny carved olive-wood bird, destroyed in the fire, symbolizes Marcus's childhood home in Tuscany. Now that he has recovered his father's signet ring, he has no need for the bird. In his quest to recover the lost honor of his father's Legion, Marcus has forged a new life for himself. He has created a new home among those who love him and are loyal to him. Presumably, Marcus and his contemporaries are the forefathers of a new world order, the British Empire.



Characters

Marcus Flavius Aquila

The Auxiliary Cohort of the Second Roman Legion is Marcus's first command. He is just nineteen, a thin, dark, arrogant citizen of the city of Rome. His forehead is branded between the brows, showing the mark of the Raven degree of Mithras. Marcus is the son of a soldier. As a boy, he lived quietly on the family farm near Clusium while his father served with Legions in Judea, Egypt and Britain. His father had planned to retire in Britain, but instead marched out with the ill-fated Ninth Legion, the Hispana, never to be heard of again. Marcus's last name, Aquila, literally means Eagle, symbolizing his proud military heritage, bravery and his quest for the standard of the Ninth.

After Marcus's mother's death, Marcus was raised by his Roman uncle, a greedy official who sold the family farm. Marcus and his uncle never got along and were both happy when Marcus turned eighteen and was old enough to enroll in the Legion. At the beginning of the narrative, Marcus is ambitious, hoping eventually to command an Egyptian Legion. He dreams of buying back the family's farm in the Etruscan hills when he retires from the Legion.

Esca Mac Cunoval

Esca is a gladiator and slave about Marcus's own age, nineteen or twenty years old. He is the son of Cunoval and a member of the Brigante tribe. He has been a slave just two years, captured during his tribe's uprising against the Roman overlords. Esca is a former armor-bearer, assisting his father before he was old enough to fight. His father was Clan Chieftain, commanding 500 warriors, a position comparable to Marcus's own rank in the Legion.

In the Brigante tribe, men become warriors at sixteen. A year after Esca became a warrior, the tribesmen launched an attack against the Romans. Esca was his father's charioteer. His father and brothers were all killed in the battle. Esca's mother begged her father to kill her before the Romans overran their village, to escape being raped. Esca's father complied. Esca swears he would have fought to the death, but he was knocked unconscious by a blow. Waking up, Esca discovered he had been taken captive by the Romans and was sold into slavery.

Esca's ear is clipped, showing that he is a slave. He is loyal and courageous. He first attracts Marcus's attention at the Saturnalia games, where Esca is a gladiator. In a contest to the death, Esca fights bravely against the intimidating Fisher, despite his obvious fear. When Esca is inevitably defeated, Marcus rouses the crowd to show him mercy. Marcus is so impressed that he spends all of his savings from his days with the Legion to purchase the man.



Uncle Aquila

Marcus's Uncle Aquila is his father's elder brother. He is a huge man with a freckled, bald head and large bony hands. At first, Marcus hopes that Uncle Aquila will be like his father. He's disappointed but soon learns to love Aquila for his unique character. Twenty years older than Marcus's father, Uncle Aquila lives on a quiet farm in Calleva with his elderly wolf-hound Procyon. Aquila is a retired legionnaire himself, having served as a camp commandant, one of the highest positions available. Aquila amuses himself by writing a lengthy History of Siege Warfare, which he has been working on for more than ten years.

Drusillus

Drusillus is a Centurion, Marcus's second in command of the cohort. He is much older and more experienced than Marcus, a veteran of many campaigns. Marcus and Drusillus quickly become friends.

Cradoc

Cradoc is Marcus's Briton hunting guide while he is in camp. Marcus considers the man a friend and feels betrayed when Cradoc, in his chariot, leads a group of tribesmen against the garrison commanded by Marcus.

Stephanos

Uncle Aquila's ancient Greek personal slave, Stephanos serves as valet and general factotum. Stephanos is Greek and was born into slavery. According to the author, this means he never resents his lot in life.

Sassticca

Uncle Aquila's cook and housekeeper, Sassticca is a tall thin old woman who can hit like a man. Depressed by his wound at first, Marcus finds Sassticca's solicitous attentions intrusive. She seems to pamper him like a child. When Marcus returns from his adventure with Eras, he appreciates Sassticca's delicious honey cakes.

Tribune Servius Placidus

At the wolf hunt, Placidus compliments Esca on his prowess. Then the Tribune sees Esca's clipped ear and adds derisively, "for a slave." Hearing of the incident, Marcus derisively calls Placidus a six-month soldier, meaning a Roman of noble birth serving his obligatory six months of military service.



Cottia

Cottia is Uncle Aquila's next door neighbor. With her fiery red hair and pointed chin, she reminds Marcus of a vixen. Cottia lives with her Uncle Kaeso, a magistrate, and his vain, supercilious wife, Valaria. Like her aunt, Cottia is of the Iceni, but her aunt and uncle have pretensions and like to act as Roman as possible, even speaking Latin at home.

Cottia's father, a horseman, was killed breaking a young horse. Her mother married a hunter, who supported her brother but refused to have a girl child in his house. Instead, Cottia's mother allowed her childless sister to adopt the girl. When he leaves on his quest, Marcus gives the girl his gold military bracelet to wear in his absence, a symbol of his fidelity and a promise to return.

Rufus Galarius

Galarius is a former surgeon of the Second Legion, now retired. When Marcus's wounded thigh has not healed after almost a year, Uncle Aquila calls his friend. Galarius discovers splinters deep within the wound and performs painful surgery to remove them.

Guern the Hunter

When Marcus and Esca first hear a disembodied whistling, the tune of an old legion marching song in a deserted fort, they think it's a ghost. Then Guern appears, dressed as one of the Painted People in an ochre kilt. They soon learn that the man is a Roman deserter who has been accepted into the Briton tribes. He is married to a Celtic woman, and they have three children.

Dergdian the Chieftain

Dergdian is a young man of the Seal People, a clan of the Epidaii tribe. His clansmen are the keepers of the Holy Place, and they are the only ones who have the power to make new spears and to initiate boys into manhood. Dergdian's small son has a serious eye infection, and Marcus stays with him for several days to treat it.

Liathan

Liathan is Dergdian's younger brother. He joins the search for Marcus and Esca wearing the emerald signet ring on a thong around his neck. Liathan is determined to return the signet ring to Marcus, even if that means burying it with him.



Objects/Places

Roman Britain

As a young Centurion, Marcus accepts his first post as cohort commander in Roman Britain. During the novel, he travels throughout the isle, including England and the Scottish highlands and lowlands. Many sites in present-day Britain are detailed in the novel.

Etruria

Marcus's home is Etruria, present-day Tuscany, Italy. He has fond memories of his family's Tuscan farm and longs to return there someday.

The Brand of Mithras

Like many members of the Roman Legion, Marcus worships the god Mithras and bears the brand of initiation between his brows. Mithras was the savior god of a mysterious religion originating in Greece.

The Eagle

The standard of each Roman Legion was a bronze or silver Eagle, carried on a pole. The Eagle symbolized the Legion's honor. Some standard bearers were even said to force cowardly troops into battle simply by advancing with the Eagle, since no soldier would knowingly allow his Legion's Eagle to be captured. Since Marcus's father was First Cohort Commander of the Lost Ninth Legion, he was responsible for protecting the Eagle.

The Signet Ring

Marcus's father, who is unnamed in the novel, wore a signet ring. It was set with a large, flawed emerald and had the family dolphin standard. Just as the Eagle symbolized the man's loyalty to his profession and empire, the signet ring symbolizes his love of and loyalty to his family.

Hadrian's Wall

The wall, named after Emperor Hadrian, separated Roman Britain from the Celtic tribes of Scotland. It increased security by creating a barrier for the "barbarians" to cross. It also separated the Brigante and Selgovae tribes, who could have overpowered the



Roman forces in the region if they united. The wall was begun in 122 A.D. and took about ten years to complete. When Marcus and Esca recover the Eagle of the Ninth, they flee towards the wall, realizing that once they cross it, they will have the protection of the Roman Legions. Hadrian's Wall is a symbol of Roman power and authority, built on orders by Emperor Hadrian, who once served with the Roman Legion in Britain.

The Bronze Ring Brooch

In disguise as Demetrius of Alexandria, the oculist, Marcus wears a purple cloak secured with a distinctive round bronze ring brooch. When the ring brooch is found near the Eagle's hiding place, the tribesmen realize Marcus and Esca have taken it.

The Red Rose

Dubris is Marcus's first command. When he arrives there, a potted red rose in the courtyard is blooming, planted by a previous commander. By the time the rose's last bloom falls, Marcus has been injured and must leave the Legion. Thus, his entire military career lasts just one summer. The red rose symbolizes bravery, loyalty and the brevity of life.

Aquae Sulis

On Marcus's return from his dangerous mission, he is disappointed to discover that Cottia is away at Aquae Sulis, or Bath, with her aunt.

Caledonia

To find the Eagle of the Ninth, Marcus and Esca crisscross Caledonia, or the Scottish highlands, repeatedly.

The Olive-wood Bird

As a young boy, Marcus carved a tiny dove out of olive wood from the trees on the family farm in Tuscany. He carries the bird with him throughout his career with the Legions, as a symbol of home. When Marcus starts on his quest, he realizes he must leave his boyhood home behind and burns the bird in an offering to the god Mithras. The final Chapter 1s entitled *The Olive-wood Bird*, meaning that Marcus has recovered his sense of family and home by releasing his childhood.

Setting

The Eagle of the Ninth takes place in Britain in A.D. 117. Marcus, the protagonist, incurs a wound in his first battle and is forced to resign from the army. His father's legion, the Ninth Hispanic, marched north to Scotland nine years before on a mission to quell an uprising among the Caledonian tribes beyond the Roman wall. The legion disappeared, and rumors about this mysterious disappearance have tarnished the legion's reputation. With his freed slave, a Briton named Esca, Marcus sets off on a quest to find out what has happened to the Ninth Legion. Disguised as a traveling oculist whose medical skill makes him welcome among the enemy Celtic tribes, he roams the countryside in search of the standard of the lost legion, a bronze eagle. The narrative describes the scenery in colorful and romantic terms that contrast the Romanized southern part of England with the wilder, more dramatic mountains and lochs of the land that is now known as Scotland.

Social Sensitivity

The cross-cultural focus of the novel makes it socially relevant today. Sutcliff depicts the clash of the Celtic and the Roman cultures with sensitivity and appreciation for the unique strengths of each. The loyalty that the Seal People have to their gods of darkness and the power that the Druids have over the British tribes mirror Marcus's devotion to his god, Mithras. These warlike gods lead their followers to death and violence in the name of defending their ways of life, but the novel does not glorify war.

Scenes of violence are minimal, and honor, courage, and loyalty are stressed.

On an individual basis, the characters confront others as human beings whom they can respect despite their differences. Marcus learns to tolerate cultural differences, and in the end, he abandons plans to return to Italy and chooses to make Britain his home.



Literary Qualities

Sutcliff portrays Marcus's experiences against a backdrop of the historical events of the Roman occupation of the British Isles. Details concerning everyday life in Roman Britain lend an authenticity to the narrative that is heightened by Sutcliffe's insertion of Latin terms whose meanings are evident from the context. The descriptions of clothing, food, houses, military and religious customs, and medical practices provide fascinating insights into the world Marcus inhabits. The author accurately describes the second-century characters' religious beliefs as well. For example, when Marcus and Esca enter the shrine of the Painted People, the tangible pressure of the gods of darkness almost overcomes them until Marcus calls on his own god, Mithras, in the Name of Light.

Symbols reinforce the narrative's themes. When Marcus begins the journey to find the lost eagle, he makes an offering to Mithras of a little olive-wood bird. The sacrifice of this memento that he has carried for years symbolizes the loss of his youth as he takes on the task of vindicating his father's memory. The one object that Marcus has from his father—the flawed emerald ring that Tradui returns to Marcus after telling him about the Ninth Legion's demise—represents the need to accept flaws, weakness, and limitation. The emerald's flaw does not lessen the gem's value in Marcus's eyes, just as the wound in his leg does not prevent him from acting bravely in his quest. Accepting limitations is the mark of the mature person.

The effectiveness of *The Eagle of the Ninth* depends on the suspenseful plot as Marcus unravels a tale of weakness and betrayal, and on the realistic details of life in those times. Effective descriptions of towns, villages, mountains, lakes and streams, ancient fortifications, and sacred shrines provide a vivid canvas on which the drama of the novel unfolds. But the novel's greatest appeal springs from the development of the main character, who with the help of his uncle, his friends, and the wolf cub, learns that self-acceptance and free choice are the most important human qualities.



Themes

The Roman Empire

The most effective parts of *The Eagle of the Ninth* are the sections depicting everyday life in Britain during the days of the Roman Empire. The lives of soldiers in the Legion, Celtic tribesmen and even pompous merchants are effectively detailed. Many significant details regarding everyday life are worked into the narrative, including place names, religions and practices. In the more than fifty years since the novel was written, more information has been uncovered about the Roman Empire and the Roman Legions. Some of the new information differs from Sutcliff's version, but this in no way diminishes the overall impact of the novel. Perhaps primary among this new information is records of the Ninth Roman Legion outside of Britain until at least 161 A.D.

The Roman Empire appropriated much Ancient Greek art, culture and religion as its own. In part, this was an intentional strategy on the part of the Romans. By adapting the best of conquered civilizations, Rome became more efficient with little additional work. It was also easier to govern a country when the natives were allowed to retain their own customs and religion as far as possible.

However, the appropriation and dissemination of Greek art and culture vastly exceeds that of other conquered nations. One example is in sculpture. Virtually all Roman statuary was adapted from the Greek. The Romans created so many copies of the most famous Greek statues that virtually every modern art museum has a few. The reason was simple. Romans admired the Ancient Greeks and strove to emulate them. By imitating the Greeks' habits, they hoped to appropriate authority as the natural heirs to the Greeks.

Just as the Romans tried to assume a mantle of preordained authority by associating themselves with the Greeks, the British Empire of the 19th and early 20th century attempted to establish the Roman Empire as their natural predecessors. Sutcliff's novel seems to suggest that the Celtic clansmen of pre-Roman Britain were violent savages, while nobility and culture worthy of Britain's future rulers was introduced by the Roman Empire. This may partly be attributed to chauvinism, as the tribes Sutcliff portrays most disparagingly are those of present-day Scotland and Ireland. The view of the more "English" southern tribes, those more Romanized, is more favorable. Thus, at the end of *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Marcus Aquila remains in Britain, presumably to found a new line of future rulers.

The novel makes a fairly thorough argument that some people are born to be subjugated, such as the almost irrationally loyal Esca. Others, by virtue of noble birth and education, are born to rule. This goes against many modern beliefs, and the author's contention that those born into slavery never miss freedom may seem particularly unbelievable to modern readers. Esca accomplishes everything Marcus does on their quest and more, and yet his only reward is a lifetime of subservience. He



is accorded citizenship, rare for a Briton, but a basic right that Marcus has enjoyed from birth.

Belonging

The need to belong is universal. In *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Marcus, Esca, Cottia and even Cub are all searching for a place where they belong. Eventually each of them finds it. Marcus has been discharged from the Roman Legion after being wounded in a heroic battle. He has never imagined any life except the Legion or farming his family's land in Etruria. Now, neither is an option. Disabled and despondent, the best he can imagine is a life as a wealthy man's secretary.

Esca is a gladiator and slave when Marcus meets him. The young Briton clansman's entire family has been killed fighting the very Legions Marcus represents. Even when Marcus frees Esca from slavery, he has no village to return to. Esca, representing the eternal comrade, can imagine no finer fate than serving Marcus for the rest of his life.

Cottia is a fatherless girl of thirteen at the beginning of the novel. She is being raised by her shallow, pretentious aunt and uncle after her mother's remarriage. Cottia rejects the pretense that she is a young Roman maiden and instead strives to truly represent the proud Iceni, her native tribe. Although it is not explicitly stated in the novel, the presumption is that Cottia will marry Marcus.

Esca brings home a tiny wolf cub orphaned during a hunt, and Marcus names the animal Cub. The wolf, too, must search for its true home. When Cub is fully grown, Marcus releases him into the wild. Cub returns of his own violation, thereby securing Marcus's affection.

Loyalty

Loyalty is an important underlying theme in *The Eagle of the Ninth*. Marcus's first loyalty is to the Roman Legions, just as his father's was. Marcus cannot imagine any other life, and he values the legionaries above all other people. He regards soldiering and farming as inherently akin and as the only two honorable pursuits of men.

When Marcus is separated from the Legion because of his wound, he remains loyal. To Marcus, loyalty to the Legions and loyalty to his father are inseparable. The Ninth Legion was his father's last command, and no one truly knows his father's fate. Thus, when the Legate of the Second Legion suggests that the Eagle of the Lost Ninth be recovered, Marcus sees a chance to bring honor to the Lost Ninth Legion and his father simultaneously. The quest also provides occupation for Marcus at a turning point in his life.

Esca displays commendable loyalty to Marcus. He abandons his clan and their beliefs to assist Marcus, who is essentially an enemy. Esca declares his undying loyalty to Marcus even before the young Centurion frees him. In part, this is gratitude towards



Marcus for saving his life at the Saturnalia games. Marcus also accepts the gratitude of Cottia and Cub as his natural prerogative.

To Marcus's dismay, events show that many members of the Lost Ninth Legion were traitors, disloyal both to Rome and to their commander, Marcus's father. Among these is Guern, now a Dumnoni clansman. Although he remained loyal through the first round of mutinies, Guern eventually deserted the Legion when he was still able to fight. Despite his desertion, Guern remains loyal to the Eagle and helps Marcus escape with it.



Themes/Characters

The major characters of the novel are all exiles in some way. The lessons they learn from one another about freedom, self-acceptance, loyalty, and interdependence constitute the novel's themes.

His mother's remarriage and the sale of his family's farm exile Marcus Flavius Aquila from his home in Italy, and then a leg wound forces him out of the army.

His uncle offers him a home in Britain, but he too is an ex-legionary and an expatriate. Marcus's traveling companion, Esca, is a captured British warrior who has been enslaved. Marcus's neighbor Cottia is an orphan who resists her aunt's attempts to turn her into a Romanized Briton, and Guern, who seems to be a Briton, proves to be a former member of the ill-fated Ninth Hispanic.

These characters must come to terms with exile before they can enjoy full lives.

The wolf cub that Esca finds and brings home to cheer the ailing Marcus symbolizes the lives of all these exiles. Named Cub, a generic term of no particular culture, the wolf receives love from his protectors but ultimately must be set free to determine his own fate. Marcus realizes that to make real choices one must be free, and so he frees Esca before they leave on their perilous quest.

Marcus's painful growth toward adulthood also contributes to his relationship with his uncle's slave, Sassticca. When he is ill and wounded, he cannot bear her fussing over him, because this reinforces his fears of being helpless and dependent. As he grows stronger and more independent, he treats Sassticca with kindness and forbearance and accepts her care with good grace.

Marcus's adventures teach him to accept the limitations that circumstances place in his way and to courageously confront his worst fears. Along the way, he all but recovers from the painful wound that has cut short his army career, and he wins the loyalty and friendship of Esca, his former slave.

Marcus and Esca's friendship reflects the blending of two cultures and the strength that arises from such a union.

Marcus leads the expedition to the dangerous land north of the Roman wall, while Esca's knowledge of the land and people enable the two to pursue the lost legion. On their flight from the shrine at The Place of Life with the recaptured eagle, they rely on each other and on the help of the last surviving legionary for the success of their mission.

Style

Point of View

The Eagle of the Ninth is written in the third person past tense from the point of view of Marcus Aquila, the protagonist. The narrative consists of Marcus's exploits in Britain, from his arrival to his return from the quest amongst the clans of Caledonia, present-day Scotland. Information from Marcus's childhood is included briefly as flashbacks where necessary. The narrative unfolds in real time as it happens, with little retrospective information. Thus, the reader is constantly in suspense about Marcus's fate and that of his faithful retainer, Esca.

From this perspective, author Rosemary Sutcliff is able to reveal much of Marcus's innermost thoughts and feelings but little of the other characters. Thus, readers must infer the opinions and emotions of Cottia and Uncle Aquila. Esca reveals more of his own emotions and thoughts through conversations with Marcus, especially when they are fleeing south. This results in Marcus and Esca being the only two fully developed characters in the novel.

Events outside Marcus's direct experience are revealed through conversation. From Guern, the Roman legionnaire turned Celtic tribesman and an old warrior of the Epidaii tribe, Marcus is able to piece together the last days of the Ninth Legion. He learns of Esca's exploits retrieving the Eagle from its hiding place through the man's report and about his own awards by the Senate from the Legate and a message on a papyrus roll.

Setting

The novel is set in Roman Britain about 127 A.D. The timeline is dated from the supposed disappearance of the Ninth Legion ten years prior, in 117 A.D. The saga opens in Dubis, where Marcus is stationed in his first Legionary command. Marcus is originally from Etruria, present-day Tuscany, Italy, where his family had an estate. Upon his father's death when he was twelve, Marcus went to live in Rome with his pompous uncle. The greedy uncle sold the family estate, but Marcus dreams of repurchasing it when he retires with full pension from the Legion after twenty years.

When Marcus is injured, he accepts his uncle's invitation to visit him at Calleva Atrebatum, present-day Silchester. There, Uncle Aquila has a quiet estate and generous manor house. When Marcus departs on his quest, he and Esca travel north to the deserted fortress of Isca Dumnoniorum at what is now Exeter. They travel through the former Roman province of Valentia, or lowland Scotland.

Together, the two men crisscross Caledonia or the Scottish highlands, searching for the Eagle. They cover many Scottish tribal territories including the Selgovae (near Dumfries and Ayrshire), the Novantae (close to Kircudbrightshire and Wigtown), the Dumnonii (near present-day Devon, Ayr, Lanark and Renfrew). Eventually the two find the Eagle



in the land of the Epidaii tribe, around Loch Awe. Their precipitous departure leads them back through Valentia and Caledonia to Hadrian's Wall. Finally, they return home to Calleva.

Language and Meaning

The author uses language effectively to evoke a sense of place and time in this historical novel. She uses the Latin place names for English and Scottish cities, including Aquae Sulis for Bath, Dubris for Dover and Caledonia for the Scottish highlands. The net effect of these terms is to create a sense of a complete, perfectly realized alternate world that bears only fleeting resemblance to anything the reader is familiar with.

Sutcliff utilizes many unique phrases and words to achieve her aims. She uses the phrase "as may be" several times to mean "as possible," for example when Marcus orders his men to "turn out the cohort to action stations as quietly as may be." The phrase "In the back of beyond" is used to indicate underlying causes. The word "sweff" is utilized several times as a synonym for "swift."

The Eagle of the Ninth was first published in England, and the author uses British words, spelling and punctuation. The game known familiarly to Americans as checkers is referred to by its British name, "draughts." British spellings include "honour" for honor and "Colosseium" for the Roman Coliseum. British punctuation includes the use of single quote marks rather than the more familiar American double quotation marks (" "). In a British convention, many words are hyphenated, such as pine-woods, signet-ring and ring-brooch. In popular American usage, these would normally be either one word or two, without a hyphen.

Structure

The Eagle of the Ninth is divided into 21 chapters. Each Chapter 1s designated, appropriately enough, by roman numerals, as well as a title. The first three chapters deal with Marcus's exploits in the Roman Legion. The first chapter details most of the background information and his early history. Chapters II and III tell of the battle where Marcus is wounded and wins an award for bravery and fidelity. In the fourth chapter, Marcus is discharged from the Legion after being wounded, a life-altering event.

Marcus meets his faithful retainer Esca in Chapter 4. The two receive their marching orders from the Legate of the Second Legion in Chapter 10. The fate of the unlucky Ninth Legion is detailed in chapter 13. They find the Eagle and recover it from the Epidaii tribesmen in chapter 14. Chapters 15 through 14 detail their escape from the pursuing tribesmen. They almost escape in chapter 15, but their deception is uncovered in chapter 16.

Marcus and Esca elude capture with the help of the tribesman and former legionary Guern in chapters 17 and 18. The climax comes in chapter 19, when the two are almost



captured. In chapter 20 the Eagle is returned to the Legate and interred in a secret compartment in Uncle Aquila's house. Chapter 21 details the awards Marcus receives from the Roman Senate for his exploits and his decision to remain in Britain with Uncle Aquila and Cottia.



Quotes

"[Marcus] 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!'" Chapter 2, pg. 20

"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." Chapter 3, pg. 25

"'Better to be a laughing-stock than lose the fort for fear of being one,' returned [Drusillus] the centurion. 'It does not pay to take chances on the Frontier - and there was a new moon last night.'" Chapter 3, pg. 26

"'Get ready to form testudo,' [Marcus] ordered. 'And you can leave room for me. This tortoise is not going into action with its head stuck out!'" Chapter 3, pg. 31

"'In my tribe, when a she-wolf with whelps is killed, we sometimes take the young ones to run with the dog-pack,' Esca said. 'It they are like this one, little, little, so that they remember nothing before; so that their first meat comes from their master's hand.'" Chapter 4, pg. 65

"'It was peaceful in this house before you came,' said Uncle Aquila with resignation. 'You are an unutterable nuisance, but I suppose you must have your own way.'" Chapter 8, pg. 84

"Claudius Hieronimianus bent his head. "Go then. I am not your Legate, but I give you your marching orders.'" Chapter 10, pg. 112

"'The man who sold [the ponies] to me swore they were sired out of the stables of the High King of Eriu.' "'Did you by any chance believe him?' "'Oh no,' said Esca. . . 'I told the man I sold ours to, that they were sired out of the stables of Queen Cartimandua. He did not believe me, either.'" Chapter 16, pg. 199

"'Oh when I joined the Eagles, (As it might be yesterday) I kissed a girl at Clusium Before I marched away.'" - Guern, Chapter 16, pg. 207

"Guern said, 'So. I have seen the Eagle once more. Maybe after today I shall not look on a Roman face nor hear my own tongue spoken again. . . It is time that you were on your way.'" Chapter 17, pg. 212

"'That was a mistake,' Marcus said. 'You should have kept with the rest of the hunt, not come thrusting in here on your own.'" Chapter 17, pg. 222



"Marcus set his bundle carefully on the table. 'We have brought back the Hispana's lost Eagle,' he said, rather muzzily, and very quietly crumpled forward on top of it." Chapter 19, pg. 230



Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Marcus decide to befriend Esca after seeing him at the Saturnalia games? What is attractive about Esca's personality?

2. When Esca brings home the wolf cub, he says that it is possible to train such an animal to become tame in the same way that a dog is. Are there any similarities between the cub and Marcus? Between the cub and Esca?

3. Cottia resists her aunt's attempt to give her a Roman name. What does this symbolize for her?

4. The heron feathers on Cradoc's spear, the olive-wood bird, and the bronze eagle share a symbolic meaning in the novel. What do they mean? What is the significance of the eagle's missing wings?

5. Marcus travels disguised as an oculist named Demetrius of Alexandria.

Why is this a well-chosen disguise? Consider both the practical and symbolic reasons.

6. Esca is rewarded for his loyalty with both freedom and Roman citizenship.

What reward does Marcus win, and why is this appropriate?

7. When Marcus and Esca compare their weapons, they discuss the meaning of the design of the Roman straight line and the Celtic curve. What values does each represent?

8. What role does Cottia play in the lives of Marcus and Esca? What duties does she volunteer to perform as her contribution to Marcus's quest? Do these make her a less interesting character?



Essay Topics

In the initial battle with Cradoc, Marcus throws himself on the lead chariot, risking almost certain death in order to give his men time to return to the garrison. In your opinion, is this action brave or foolhardy? Why?

Marcus feels friendly towards his hunting guide Cradoc, and he feels betrayed when the hunter joins the revolt. How does Marcus understand Cradoc better after his sojourn among the Celts?

Early in the novel, Marcus is disabled by a war wound and must abandon all his dreams of the future. How does he deal with this situation?

Why does Esca remain with Marcus after he is granted his freedom?

Why does Marcus want to recover the Eagle of the Ninth?

Esca, Marcus, Cub and Cottia are each searching for a place where they feel they belong. Are they successful?

What happened to the Lost Ninth Legion?

Research the Ninth Roman Legion online or in the library. What information about the legion do we have now that wasn't available when *The Eagle of the Ninth* was written?

Do you feel that the fact that more information about the Roman Legions has been uncovered in the past fifty years diminishes the power of this narrative? Explain why or why not.

Why does Marcus choose to remain in Britain instead of returning home to his native Etruria?

What are some similarities between the Roman Empire and the British Empire of the 1800s?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Images of light and dark occur throughout the novel. What are the various meanings of these images? How does the conflict between light and dark reach its height at the climax of the novel?
2. Dynamic characters change as a result of their experience. Discuss the ways in which Marcus matures in the novel. How has he changed by the end of the story, and what has brought about this change?
3. Placidus serves as a foil for Marcus; that is, the strong contrast between the two characters' personalities highlights Marcus's distinctive qualities. Detail how Placidus serves as a foil and discuss any other characters who serve as foils in the novel.
4. A historical novel can deepen our awareness not only of the past but also of our own culture. Discuss parallels between second-century Roman culture and twentieth-century American culture. What lessons does Marcus learn that remain relevant today?
5. The story does not have a traditional happy ending. Discuss how its ending fits the framework of a realistic historical novel.

Further Study

Davis, Lavinia R. "In Ancient Britain."

New York Times Book Review 4 (January 1959): 26. The review comments on the well-drawn characters and the exciting plot of *The Eagle of the Ninth*.

Horovitz, Carolyn. "Dimensions in Time: A Critical View of Historical Fiction for Children." Horn Book 38 (June 1962): 142-143. This article focuses on the contrast of the Roman and British elements in the novel and on the author's ability to establish a strong sense of place.

Meek, Margaret. *Rosemary Sutcliff*. London: Bodley Head, 1962. This critical study covers the works written before 1962. It gives the most detailed analysis of the literary qualities of the novels and shows how the themes are related in several works.

"Old Unhappy Far-Off Things." *Times Literary Supplement* 25 (November 1960): 15. This article points out the inspiration that Sutcliff derives from Rudyard Kipling and analyzes her prose style.

Sutcliff, Rosemary. "Thank You Address to the Children's Literature Association in Ann Arbor, Michigan, 19 May 1985 upon Receipt of the Phoenix Award." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 10 (Winter 1986): 176.

Sutcliff explains her reasons for writing historical fiction and her feelings about reading *The Eagle of the Ninth* twenty years after she wrote it.

Related Titles

Rosemary Sutcliff wrote two other novels that continue the story of Marcus Flavius Aquila's family and the Roman occupation of Britain. *The Silver Branch* tells the story of the Saxon threat to Roman peace in Britain and of the fate of Justin, who disappoints his father because he chooses to become a surgeon rather than a warrior. Like Marcus, he has a flaw for which he must compensate: he stutters and is not comfortable dealing with people. In *The Lantern Bearers* Aquila, too, has a flawed personality and has isolated himself from human warmth. In each of the three novels a young man must ask the question, "Who am I?" The novels all address themes that remain relevant today as they celebrate honor and loyalty.



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