

The Eagle

By William Livezey

As the barge slowly sailed south through the mists on Loch Ness, Donnan shivered and pulled his wool coat closer to his body. The early morning air had a sharp edge to it, and in the middle of the loch there was no protection from the wind that blew from one end of the lake to the other. The sun had not risen over the hills that bordered the loch on both sides, but Donnan could make out the looming outline of Urquhart Castle through the mist. He turned away and sat on the wooden bench that had been pointed out for the passengers.

A grizzled old man sitting across from him noted his restlessness and said with a smile, "Why so uneasy, lad?"

Donnan replied, "I am not uneasy; I was shivering from the cold." The old man laughed, "I don't find fault with you for being scared of the loch, or what lives in it."

Donnan grimaced; he knew all too well the legend of the creature that lived in Loch Ness. Many men had claimed to see it while walking on the shore or while fishing in boats. No one questioned whether or not the creature existed; too many people had seen it for it to be questioned. The sightings went back hundreds of years; the most well-known being the man of the cloth who first brought the message of one God to the highlands. "The monster is not the only mystery that surrounds this area. Have you ever heard the story of the lost legion?" the old man questioned.

"No, there is nothing I hate more than stories of Rome. Where was Rome when the Vikings invaded?" Donnan fumed. The old man smiled and leaned against the bench as his thoughts drifted back to days when he was much younger.

"Marcus, wake up!" Marcus jolted awake on his chair. He blinked rapidly to remove the blur of sleep from his eyes and looked up at Antonio, who was standing in the doorway, framed by the afternoon sunlight. Antonio grinned. "If it weren't for me, you would have missed sheep shearing!" Marcus groaned, there was nothing he hated more than sheep shearing. Even now, the din of the sheep being shorn of their wool grated on his ears.

"Well, I guess we are even now," Marcus replied with a smile. He would never forget the look on Antonio's face when the garden snake had been dropped down Antonio's shirt as he slept in the field. Marcus stood and ran a hand through his dark hair and pushed the last bit of sleep from his head. He grabbed his friend's arm and ran out into the street, pulling Antonio behind him. "If I have to suffer, I want you to enjoy the drudgery too!" Marcus laughed and the two boys started up

the street towards the fields on the hillside from whence the sheep's cries were coming from.

The village was a combination of Scottish architecture and Roman town construction with timber and stone buildings lining the road. Intersected the road at the town center was a dirt clearing with a large rock called "Pluto's Fist" because the rock looked like a clenched hand coming out of the ground. Here and there among the village, one could see a child with blond hair playing Legionnaires with his black-haired companions as their mothers carded and spun wool.

Marcus and Antonio strode up the path that led either up to the fields or down the massive lake called Loch Ness. Marcus reached the field and was immediately met by loud laughter from the men and boys who paused from their work to cause the lad some embarrassment. Marcus ignored the yells and walked over to where his father Felix was using shears on a ewe, with much of its fleece already gone. Felix looked at his son and smiled his teasing smile, "What made you think that you could skip out on shearing? Never mind, you can help me by helping hold down Rex Magnus." Rex Magnus was a massive ram whose strength and ferocity were well-known. Some of the more superstitious members of the village believed that Rex Magnus was actually a Faunus and some even claimed to hear him speak, but these stories were dismissed by much of the population. Even now, the ram king could be seen walking in circles daring any of the herders to try to get a rope around his head.

Marcus turned to talk to Antonio and found that he was speaking to the air. He whirled around trying to find his friend. Then he saw him. Marcus gasped, Antonio was creeping up behind Rex Magnus with a noose in his hands, his intentions clear. All the workers stopped and stared, waiting with bated breath to see what would happen. Marcus felt sick, he knew this wouldn't end well. The noose slipped around the ram's neck. With a snort and a bellow, Rex Magnus jumped and thundered across the field pulling the noose, the rope and the hapless Antonio behind him. Everyone was yelling at Antonio to let go before he got seriously hurt. The unfortunate boy finally released the rope and went head-over-heels across the grass. Marcus was over the stone wall separating the fields in an instant and ran to his groaning friend. "Antonio! Are you hurt?!"

Antonio rolled onto his back, "That did not go as I planned. Rex Magnus is much stronger than I expected."

"Or maybe you over-estimated your own strength!" Marcus fired back. Antonio sat up and grinned at the ring of men and boys that had formed around Marcus and himself.

Felix spoke up, "Marcus, take Antonio back to his home and have Clinicus Oppius put something on the scrapes. I am no Clinicus, but I think his main injury is his bruised ego." Marcus nodded and pulled his friend to his feet.

"Wait, where is Rex Magnus?" one of the men asked. Everyone looked around the hill but the ram was nowhere to be seen.

"He must be in his cave," *Accensus Octavius* said. Rex Magnus' cave was a place surrounded by mystery and legend. No one knew where Rex Magnus had come from and no one knew the location of the cave. As a baby, Marcus had been told never to go to the cave and he had obeyed that advice. Marcus gently tugged at Antonio's arm and slowly led him down the path back into the village.

While watching Oppius apply ointment to Antonio's scrapes Marcus was startled by Octavius bursting into the house. "Marcus come quickly. Your father has been hurt badly." Marcus was on his feet in an instant and was running up the path as worry for his father made him feel sick. He reached the field and ran straight towards the group of people standing around his father who was lying on the ground. He dropped to his knees and immediately saw what had happened. Marcus could tell from the large, bleeding wound on Felix's forehead that he had been kicked by a sheep. Miles Petronius confirmed this: "He was sheering one of the large rams when all of the sudden it gave a burst, broke free from his hold and kicked him in the skull!"

"Where is my mother?" Marcus asked.

"There!" Marcus turned and saw his mother coming up the path with Clinicus Oppius. The surgeon stepped forward. "I need some men to help me carry him to his house. I can perform my work there." Marcus and a few others help pick up the unconscious body down the hillside to the same hut where the boy had been sleeping just hours before.

In the evening, Marcus's mother shooed him out of the house, saying, "Your worries won't heal your father any faster." So Marcus decided that he would go to "Pluto's Fist," where the old men gathered every evening. Marcus hoped that their stories would help take his mind off of his worries.

Upon entering the center of town Marcus saw the fire and the men who sat around it. He was more interested in Antonio, apparently completely healed and trying to impress the daughter of the Optio with his tale of danger and bravery. Marcus laughed, Antonio had been trying to get her attention for months now, and it had taken getting pulled by a minor god to do it. Marcus turned and walked toward the fire and sat down next to the old, bent figure to whom everyone was paying close attention. Marcus had heard the story of the legion many times, but

he never tired of it. He and the others lit by the flames, listened with rapt attention as the speaker began.

Many years ago, when the Empire was starting to crumble, the Ninth legion was stationed in Carlisle. The ninth had been in Britain for many years, putting down rebellions and uprising among the highlanders. But as the empire started to fall apart, the uprisings became more and more frequent. The governor became worried and decided to make an example of a town outside of Hadrian's Wall that was rebelling. He ordered the Ninth to march and kill and burn the entire village. The legion was commanded by an honorable man who thought that what they had been ordered to do was wrong. He gathered the officers of the Ninth and told them that he planned to abandon the empire. All of the officers agreed and so the plan to escape was made. One morning, the Ninth Legion marched into the mists and was never seen again. They were not the only ones who disappeared. All of the families of the legion also vanished without a trace that day.

The legion marched for several days through the highlands with the families following it until they reach the banks of Loch Ness. The Commanders chose the very ground we are sitting on as where they would establish their new dwelling place. So the warriors became sheep herders and farmers. The armor and weapons of the legion were packed away until a time of need. The unmarried men of the legion found highland brides and the new civilization flourished. But the magical eagle of the legion was hidden by the original men of the Ninth so none would dare to steal it. No one knows where the eagle is to this day. But if danger threatens the village, it has been said that the eagle will appear and the legion will re-form to defend its homes and families.

Marcus yawned, it was getting late and there was more work to be done tomorrow. He stood and stretched the stiffness out of his legs and walked to his house. His father was sleeping peacefully on the bed. After so much excitement that day Marcus quickly fell asleep.

In the morning, Marcus made sure to be in the field at the precise time that work started for the day. All the workers were busy at their shearing when a cry went up from the village. The men all looked up from their work as the voices grew louder and more excited. "Velites Calavia, go see what the problem is." *Accensus Octavius* commanded. Calavia put down his shears and trotted down the path to the village. A few moments later he sprinted back up the hill.

"The Vikings, they are coming! Tirones Horatia saw their ships sailing down the loch while hunting!" Men put down their tools and quickly put the sheep back into their pens and then hurried down to huts. Marcus ran into his house and saw

his mother sitting next to his father, who was in one of the beds with bandages wrapped around his head. “Father, mother, the Vikings are sailing down loch!”

Felix spoke “I know Marcus, I can hear the commotion.” The wounded legionnaire sat up with much effort and stared at his son intently. “Marcus, you must do as I say exactly.”

“Yes Father.”

“I am not able to join the men. My head hurts too much, but you, you have been training for this day.” Felix turned to his wife. “Cassia, you must show Marcus the chest and help him with the armor.”

“But Felix, Marcus is too young,” his mother protested.

Felix cut her off. “He is sixteen; he is a man and it is time he takes on a man’s duties. Now Marcus.” Felix paused to get a painful breath. “Your mother will show you a chest. You must put on what you find in it.”

“Yes, father.” Marcus followed his mother into a backroom of the house where he found a large worn chest with a large iron lock. Marcus had always wondered what was so valuable in the chest that father had locked it up. His mother reached for a key hidden behind an animal skin which hung next to the chest. She opened the chest and removed a blanket from over the contents. There, glittering in the morning light that flowed through a window, Marcus saw a Legionary’s armor. “This was your father’s armor, his father’s armor, and his father’s armor. Now, it is yours.” Marcus could see her pride but also her deep worry.

“Don’t worry, Mother. I won’t be fighting alone.” Already, the clang of scabbards and chest plates and shields came through the window. His mother smiled and helped Marcus on with the armor. After putting on the tunic, then he placed segmented chest plate over his shoulders and his mother tightened the straps. Marcus took the gladius in its scabbard and belted it around his waist. “There, I am ready.” He felt invincible in his armor.

“Wait, there is one more thing,” his mother said. Out of the chest Marcus’s mother took a leopard skin.

“Father has a leopard skin?!” Marcus said in surprise.

“Yes, your father was the eagle bearer. That is why you have no shield or spears.”

“But I have no eagle to carry,” Marcus objected.

Felix called to his son from the bed, “Marcus come here.” Marcus strode to his father. The Legionnaire smiled at his son. “You look quite at home. But you are right—you have no eagle. Marcus, do you know where Rex Magnus’s cave is?”

Marcus started in surprise. “No, why do I need to know where Rex Magnus’s cave is?”

“My son, you will find the cave hidden behind some brambles halfway up the hill from the lower stone wall. You must enter the cave and get the eagle.”

“But what about Rex Magnus?” Marcus questioned his father.

“He will not hurt you, as he knows his duty. Now go, there is no time to be lost.” Marcus walked out the door in a daze, his mind was spinning as childhood dreams were starting to come true. Here and there among the buildings, he caught glimpses of crimson. He started to run up the hillside. He reached the lower stone wall and turned as a shout rose up from below him. Coming around the bend in the loch were three long galleys, their colorful sails caught the morning wind and the shields that lined the bulwark glistened. Marcus started his ascent with renewed vigor. Then he saw it, exactly as his father had said. There was a bramble bush at the base of a small cliff and just underneath the outcropping Marcus could make out an opening. He hurried to opening and shoved the brambles aside and stepped into the dark of the cave. It was black as a moonless night. Marcus put out his hand to the wall of the cave, breathed deeply and started to follow the passage. He continued and up ahead he saw it was getting lighter. Marcus stopped. He had just heard something, like a rock being kicked. “Who’s there?” Marcus called. He was met with silence. He was about to call again when the faint light in front of him was blocked out by the shape of a massive ram. “Rex Magnus.” Marcus breathed.

“That is what I am called.” A voice boomed. Marcus fell back in terror. “Have no fear; I will not harm a Legionnaire.”

The minor god continued, “I know why you are here and will let you take it. My duty was to protect the eagle until it was needed, and that time is now.” Marcus was in shock, but somehow started to follow the ram towards the light. The passage suddenly widened out into a small cave with a shaft of sunlight coming down from a hole in the roof. There, shimmering was the golden eagle of the legion. In its talons were bolts of lightning. Hanging from the bar on which the eagle roosted were wreaths of past campaign glories. Marcus turned to the ram, but he was alone in the room. He reached out his hand and grasped the wooden pole. It felt cool and smooth in his hand. Marcus pulled it out of the ground. The eagle had its wings outstretched and its beak open in a cry. This was not the stately eagle that was the symbol of Rome; this was a bird of prey.

Marcus walked back through the passage and out into the light. He saw the galleys slowly rowing towards the shore as he started his march down the hillside, eagle held aloft. Some of the legionaries in the town saw him. One of the trumpeters lifted the instrument to his lips and blew a long, clear note. Almost every door opened as out of each house came a fully armed Roman. The street was

rapidly becoming a sea of red. A cloud passed over the sun. Marcus looked up. Seemingly out of nowhere dark thunderclouds were pouring over the crest of the hill behind him.

He reached the village and marched through the streets with the crimson tide following him. The Legion reached the end of the houses and rapidly filed into formation, with banners waving in the air and trumpets sounding. The three galleys had just landed and the raiders were mostly on land. They suddenly stopped and took in the sight of a fully armed Legion facing them. Some made for their ships while others tried and form an attack formation. Marcus realized that the pole was growing warm in his hand and the smell of ozone filled the air. The storm clouds above, now filled the entire sky, and he could see flashes of light among the clouds. Suddenly, massive bolts of lightning smashed into the long ships, splintering them and killing all on board. Then, with a roar, the crimson sea crashed into the Norsemen.

As the barge neared its destination, the old man who was Marcus, remembered the sea of Legionaries smashing into the Norsemen as lightning flashed overhead. After the scourge of the Norsemen had been destroyed, life went back to the peacefulness to which Marcus was accustomed. Antonio had married the Optio's daughter. Marcus had found himself a bride from a nearby highland tribe. Felix died at a ripe old age. The only mystery left was about Rex Magnus. The massive ram had disappeared the day the eagle had been found. Now, Marcus was getting ready to give the eagle and his armor to his son, so the legion would continue on. Marcus looked at Donnon and spoke in a firm tone: "You may think that Rome was not there, but you are wrong, the Ninth Legion and the eagle *were* there."