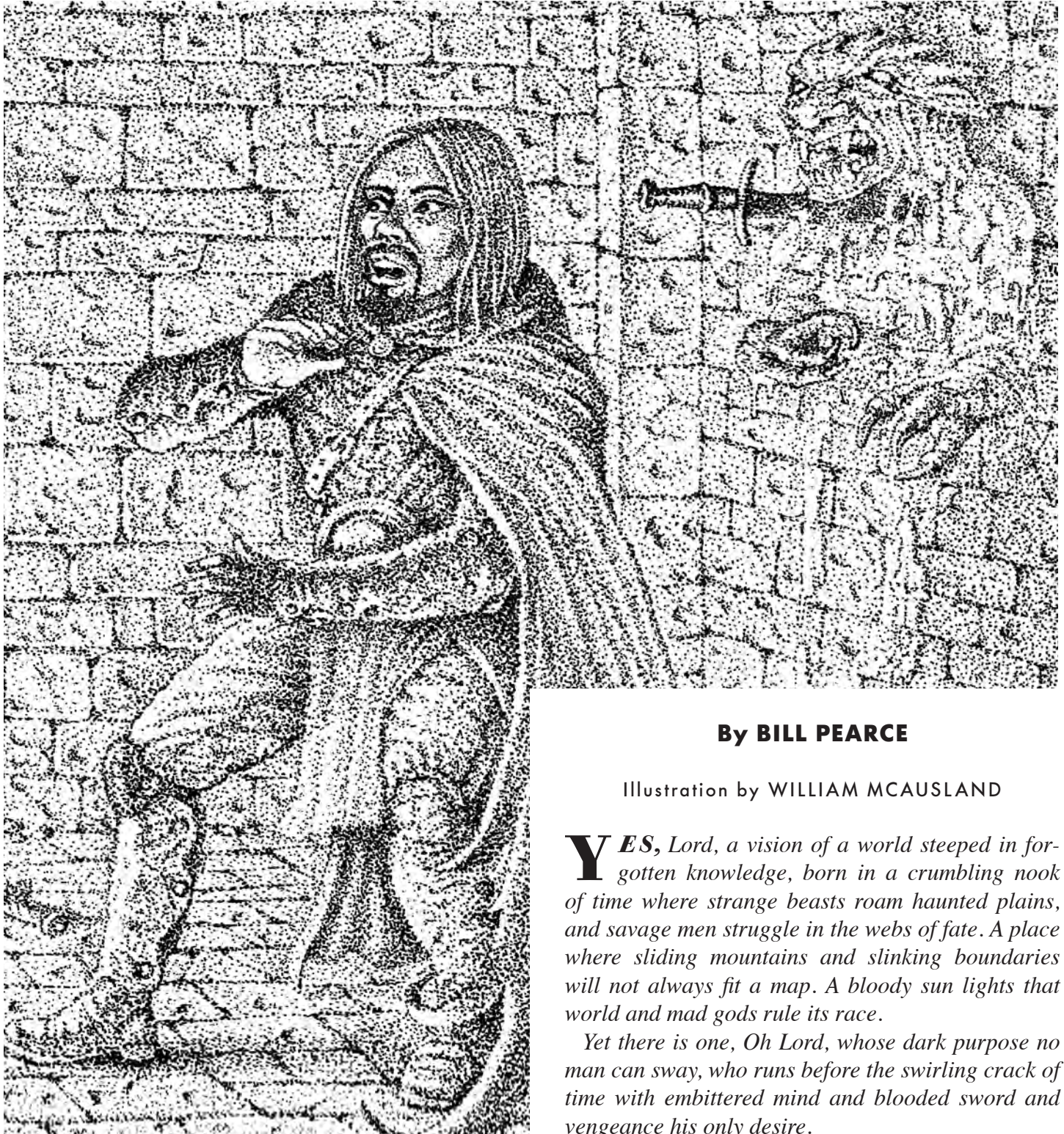


# THE EYES OF





# RATH KANON



By **BILL PEARCE**

Illustration by **WILLIAM MCAUSLAND**

**Y**ES, Lord, a vision of a world steeped in forgotten knowledge, born in a crumbling nook of time where strange beasts roam haunted plains, and savage men struggle in the webs of fate. A place where sliding mountains and slinking boundaries will not always fit a map. A bloody sun lights that world and mad gods rule its race.

Yet there is one, Oh Lord, whose dark purpose no man can sway, who runs before the swirling crack of time with embittered mind and blooded sword and vengeance his only desire.



The horse knew not the way. Sedlock Daryellow urged the beast forward — blindly, crazily with twenty horsemen chasing behind them. Daryellow twisted in the saddle, three nocked arrows and the horned bow in hand. Three horsemen blocking the narrow gap behind him fell to his single shot. Daryellow spurred the horse past a final rocky turn and finally arrived before the fortress gate.

The steep, narrow pass wound through the southern mountains of Apot, not much traveled in these times of desolation, when each city state foraged for itself. A cold, winter wind blew down the gap foretelling the snow that would soon make even this — the Southern Pass — unusable. Few wayfarers came this way, passing between the great wide walls which were not so much rock laden as solid expanses of stone.

Sedlock Daryellow reined the horse to an abrupt halt before the gate. "Open!" he cried, as arrows struck the ground to his left and right. "Open for the love of all who serve this place! Open for the love of the god who dwells here!"

The towering wall and the aged bronze gate it held cast him in shadow. Old before the ages of man and carved from the cliffs around it, this was the monastery of Rath Kanon, a lonely guardian against the freemen of the western desert. A sacred shrine, legend said, placed midway between the green hills of Areque and Sadharta's barren plains. For seven hundred years, the monks guarded the civilized lands of the east and reveled in the warfare that pleased their deity. Now they dwelled in vows of silence and basked in the light of a dying sun.

The horsemen who chased him were closer now — half with arrows ready, the others with swords drawn. He opened his throat to shout once more just as a wicket door set within the gate popped open. He ducked his head and slipped through the narrow way. It clanged shut the moment the horse's hooves were clear, and then pitch and arrows fell from the parapet onto the frustrated pursuers.

The courtyard was austere and functional, hardly occupied. Above him, Daryellow heard the cries of those trapped outside. A pair of monks hurried toward him as he fought to settle his wild-eyed horse.

"Wallis Scareye marches up the pass!" Daryellow cried. "A thousand men march with him! He will storm this place!"

Three figures rushed toward him from the ramparts. In the early morning sunlight that streamed behind them, Daryellow could hardly see. Lazily he leaned forward, allowing the leather-cowled monks to lead his horse. Finally, he noticed the arrow protruding from his right shoulder. Slowly he turned toward the three who drew closer. One was a soldier dressed in the armor and brocade of a senior officer. With her were a tall, aging priest, wasted and grim-faced, and a young boy chained to the cleric, half-dragged across the square.

For Daryellow, the world slowed even further. "Wallis Scareye," he repeated hoarsely. "At your gate...Thousand men." He fell tumbling to the cobblestones.

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**I**N the first moments after his fall, Sedlock Daryellow's wounds were cleaned and cauterized. In three days, the Monastery of Rath Kanon battled under full siege. With no surprise,

the attack came, and the monks, though out-numbered, fought back the desert men. Assault came after assault, and still the high walls held against the invaders.

Daryellow walked the battlement alone. The whining wind snapped at the mass of blond hair that hung to his shoulder, bit at his worn clothing, and scratched at the left hand that crossed his body to rest lightly on the pommel of his sheathed sword. Around him, the monks, like ants, hurried about their affairs. They refilled boiling cauldrons, refurbished ballistas, carried away the dead and wounded. The blood-spattered snow swirled around them while they prayed to a god who must be dead or sleeping.

Daryellow did not turn as footsteps approached. He did not speak as Elan Silvernails, the commander who'd met him at the gate, reached his side. She was stately and commanding in her military demeanor, taller than Daryellow. They gazed out across the ramparts at the aftermath of battle and the frenzied efforts of the monks to rebuild.

"Too few," Daryellow said. "These monks are too few. They will not hold against this horde. You are a general of Areque — where is your army?"

Elan Silvernails considered her answer. Her stance made it clear that she did not like Daryellow, his blunt question, or this situation. She'd made this mundane journey to the monastery a hundred times, but now everything had changed. She remembered three days earlier when she'd stood at the battlements and watched this stranger dash crazily up the pass to warn them of Wallis Scareye and his desert freemen.

"I'm here on a routine check of Areque's marches," she said, "and I travel with a unit of scouts and cavalymen only. But I command the king's army."

She didn't like him: this silent man — blond and weather-worn with dark, taciturn eyes. *Who was this stranger who came from nowhere, who'd warned them so succinctly and now stood apart from all the furious activity?*

"This fortress will not fail," Silvernails continued. "I have warned the king and his army will come. Areque has always befriended the enemies of her enemies. These monks stand between us and the desert freeman."

"And when enemies grow old and feeble — who will be friends? Will the king's men come soon enough? How can they arrive before the monastery falls?"

"Soon enough they come. The monks delight in battle. They will not yield quickly." Silvernails motioned around her. "And these walls are strong, but what of you, stranger? You are healed? Will you join these priestly brothers and rout the freemen?"

Daryellow smiled. "I am healed," he said. "And I have aided you once with a warning. I can help you again, but not standing at the wall with sword and bow."

He turned to Silvernails, grinned, and said, "Like a snake, this rabble army will die quickly once the head is cut off."

She understood him.

"You would kill Wallis Scareye?" Elan Silvernails laughed. "A modest proposal. And how would you break through this siege?" She gestured again — this time beyond the battlements to the army that surrounded them.

"There are rumors about the monastery of Rath Kanon," Daryellow said. "Stories of passages and secret ways that riddle

the mountain and beyond. A clever man could take a backdoor from this place and spring on Scareye unawares.”

“His guards would have you dead or in chains before you were so close.”

“Scareye will meet with me, lady, once I am away from here. He cannot refuse me; I am his cousin.”

The wind howled as Elan Silvernails thought about what he said.

She raised an eyebrow. “If you’re a cousin of Scareye, I know you, sir. You’re Sedlock Daryellow, son of Michaelon, the one of the pledge.”

Daryellow’s face did not reveal his surprise that the warlord was so well informed. He gave a slight nod.

“Yes,” he said, “although my pledge has not brought me here. This mission is strictly to fund my journeys. Without money, I cannot travel the Ocheen Sea and find those who cursed my father.”

“And if there were a passageway through the mountain and if we sent you to Walles Scareye —”

“I cannot complete this task without compensation. It is true; there is no love between Scareye and me. He and his new wife wreck what remains of my father’s army, but I could not kill him out of hand — for no reason.”

Daryellow threw his arms wide. “Surely, lady, financing me can’t compare with the costs of bringing an army down this pass in early winter?”

“You are no knight,” she said, “following a noble path from oath to oath. You are a rogue — a mercenary using one excursion to fund the next.”

Silvernails paused and thought furiously. “Very well,” she said at last. “You are hired. Be at my chambers tonight. We will sup and negotiate. And our holy father, Minos Abok, will tell tales of the secret corridor you seek. And I say this, Sedlock Daryellow; it is a brave or foolish man who seeks out the caves beneath this rock. I know of no one who’s returned from such a journey.” She turned and walked away.

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**“LET** me see if I wholly understand the truths of this proposition.” The gaunt man dressed in cowl and stiff leathers, chained to a frightened boy, spoke and gestured with his empty goblet. “A stranger arrives and warns us of imminent attack. We know nothing of him, but the assault begins. Three days later, he introduces himself as a noble of the desert tribes and proposes that we share secrets of our order and finance his venture to kill the desert king. A stranger who first asks for trust and next for money. Is there something I have missed? Is there some element of truth I have not fathomed? Tell me honestly, Elan, was this plan meant for me or for this naïve boy here with me?”

The boy swung on Minos Abok’s arm; the chain short and painful. Daryellow saw the hopelessness in his blank stare and the months of stored hate.

The four of them sat uneasily in Silvernails’ rooms. A servant attended them with foodstuffs and jars of wine.

“Our guest is Sedlock Daryellow, son of Twane Michaelon, who seeks vengeance for his father’s death,” Elan Silvernails

said, her voice showing little emotion. “There is some enmity between him and Walles Scareye. One could say that with the help of his wife’s money, Scareye bought all of Michaelon’s army after his untimely death and now attempts to take his place. Sir Daryellow may vow and quest to avenge his father, but he is also motivated to see Walles Scareye dead. This could be an easy solution to our current problem.”

Minos Abok pulled at the chain again jerking the boy almost from his feet. The priest sat at the edge of his chair. “I will not have it!” he bellowed. “This is no solution! Bring the king’s army from Areque! This is our pact for seven hundred years: the monks of Rath Kanon hold the pass against the desert freeman, and the armies of Areque aid us in times of need. Now is that time!” He banged cup on table.

“Dear Abbot,” Silvernails replied, her voice hard now but even; her lips tight. “Life and solutions are not always so obvious. Who pays for the king’s army to march down this pass in early winter and rescue your monastery? It is a huge expense. Will you — can you pay? The king cannot assume this debt. If instead, we can hire one assassin to remove Walles Scareye and his threat, the price is much more attractive.”

Minos Abok did not respond, only glared at the general. Elan Silvernails shifted her gaze to Daryellow. She wanted a change in topic. She argued for Daryellow’s plan even though she barely knew him, but she had known his father.

“I met Twane Michaelon years ago while stationed on the Sheshan borders,” she said. “He hunted the Undead there. One of the few men I’ve known to successfully collect that bounty.”

“Yes,” replied Daryellow. “Michaelon fought on the Sheshan borders after he dumped my mother and me in the slums of old El Aar.”

Silvernails leaned forward. “We heard tales of you and the shantytown gangs,” she said. “Michaelon was proud.”

Daryellow smiled while the priest continued to glare at them. “I am so pleased that the two of you have found a common acquaintance,” Minos Abok said. “And I do understand your point, general. And I suppose I must agree. We will send this assassin in lieu of an army. We will send him alone.”

The priest shifted his gaze to Daryellow. “Sir knight,” he said, “whether you succeed in killing Walles Scareye or die in the attempt, I will send you down the Secret Way. But I will have a keepsake in this venture: your father’s sword, the IceSword, Karis Kalen. You must have it with you. It will remain here with me until Scareye is dead.”

Daryellow said nothing, staring back at the priest; he considered this new twist. He wondered what his father would say to a scheme that abandoned the IceSword, his weapon, in this desperate place.

“There will be a ceremony tonight,” Minos Abok continued. “Karis Kalen will be enshrined here and after that, Sedlock Daryellow, I will show you the Secret Way through the mountain.”

“And I will pay for the death of your cousin,” Silvernails interrupted. “Bring me Walles Scareye’s head and five hundred bezants to finance your quest.”

Sedlock Daryellow nodded slowly. He had wanted the backdoor through the mountain from the beginning. Now, it was within his grasp, but he must leave his father’s sword.