

# FROM PITTSBURGH TOWARD THE UNKNOWN

THORNTON OAKLEY<sup>1</sup>

PITTSBURGH, Pennsylvania, is one of the most beautiful cities of the world. With its hills, its rivers, its spectacular panorama it delights the eye as do but few of man's major centers of habitation. In full equality I place it beside those other mighty hives of human life famed because of visual magnificence. I think of New York and its astounding grandeur; of Washington, the radiant center of the hopes of men. Paris I remember and the glories of Notre Dame; London, with its Tower, its patina of ancient history. I forget not Naples and its Vesuvian bay; Bergen nestling at the foot of its Norwegian mountains. I see Hong Kong with its junks, its riotous color, its message of the mystic East. But no one city, as it drifts before my eyes of recollection, surpasses, in appeal to my imagination, the vista of Pittsburgh, my place of birth.



From the top of Mt. Washington, the height that dominates the south side of the Monongahela River, as I look down upon the sweep of waterways, the bridges, the massing of the city's towers, the flaming foundries, I find my heart responding with all the ecstasy of my boyhood days. A halo of enchantment seems to hover over all the region, a light suggesting spirit beyond matter, telling of the indomitable will of man, of his purpose and his power to control the physical forces of nature to benefit his race.

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Oakley, noted American illustrator and mural painter, now residing in Villa Nova, Pennsylvania, was born in Pittsburgh in 1881, the son of John M. and Imogen (Brashear) Oakley. A nearly column-length account of him and his many works is to be found in the latest edition of *Who's Who in America*, and of course the illustrations accompanying this article are the work of his pen.—Ed.

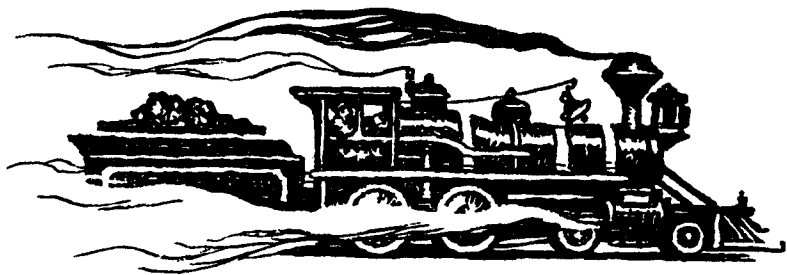
Was I unique among my playmates when even as a youngster, falling in love with trains, I felt, while watching gleaming, puffing locomotives, a thrill caused by some unanalysed reaction deeper than could have been my delight in mere machinery? Had thoughts already been engendered of values beyond things seen?

We lived, my father, mother and I, when I was a boy of twelve, in the eastern suburb of Pittsburgh known as Ben Venue, only a few miles, it is true, from the center of the city and the railroads' Union Depot, but at that time almost rural. The ancient oaks of our property have disappeared. On our once extensive grounds houses now stand compactly. Across the narrow valley, where the Pennsylvania tracks pass between the heights of Ben Venue on the south and those of Bloomfield on the north, a bridge now carries congested automobile traffic. There is left little of the place I knew as home, save the crest of the hill overlooking the railroad, a crest now not wooded but reduced to mere backyards. Here it was, I feel certain, that I first experienced my enrapturement by manifestations of man's genius, here where I sprawled upon the brink of the wall of rock, my head projecting over the abyss down which I gazed upon the passing engines.

I had comrades in my ecstasy, Dan and Ernest Nevin, neighbors across the road, cousins of Pittsburgh's famed musician Ethelbert, and gifted almost as was he with overflowing talents. We became absorbed in producing tiny models of the types of locomotives that we beheld steaming through the gulley, Dan and Ernest in constructing ingenious mechanisms that, under power of tightly wound, rubber bands would cavort around the Nevins' playroom floor. My desires were not mechanically inclined, but with my carvings I sought to suggest something that seemed to me more meaningful, to convey a message that perhaps may be described as that of wonder. Commencing with only children's blocks and a penknife to produce my models, I soon became emboldened to employ any materials whatsoever—wood, metal, cardboard, and that medium of mediums, paint—to obtain my ends. I had begun to comprehend that tools are servants, not the masters, of imagination.

Quaint were the locomotives of those days, some still bearing the bell-shaped stacks of the period of the Civil War. It was the yet rarely seen short stack that gave me and my Nevin comrades the keenest thrill, the

vertical, the unadorned that told of the dawning of an era of new designs, of new efficiencies, speaking prophetically to our eager minds as new things should to youth, to all men, but which are more often prone to cause antagonism if not alarm to the majority of the human race.



"The boy will be an artist," my father said, watching me at work upon my models. "What is an artist?" I felt my curiosity replying. After more than half a century I still am searching for the inclusive answer, although I feel assured he is not what devotees of so-called modern art would term him. My father, with his love of visual beauty, had much of the creative spirit. With mere touches of a 6-B pencil he could suggest a locomotive's black and steaming mass with a power that would set my heart to leaping. His reaction to emotion was instant. One evening when to both of us mother was reading Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* tears crept down his cheeks. "He's been there, that fellow," he gulped.<sup>2</sup> Father, only twenty and some odd years before, had been a captain in the Civil War. He spoke at times of his escape from Prison No. 10 in Richmond, while mother, when I was young enough to be cuddled in her lap, sang me to sleep with snatches of war songs. War, war. The word meant nothing to me. It was something no longer of this earth. Problems of living obviously had been solved.

By the time I was fifteen my delight in trains had broadened to include the industrial and engineering developments that had been bringing the activities of Pittsburgh to the front among the national interests. The steel works were the most notable that had changed the aspect of the rivers. Furnaces, mountains of ore massed themselves along the banks

<sup>2</sup> Our sense of Crane's artistry is sharpened when we recall that he had not been there.

of the Allegheny and the Monongahela. A haze of smoke and reddish dust overhung the city. From the Soho curves, where Fifth Avenue swings down into the heart of Pittsburgh, the view of the mills had become dramatic.

I was then a junior in the Shady Side Academy and was thrilled when I and my class were directed by our instructor in English, Charles W. Hodell, to write an essay on the vista from the curves. Here was a chance indeed to record enthusiasm for modernity. I carried the news home gleefully to my parents. It was received by my mother with an unexpected reaction. She was busy in helping to found the new Civic Club of Allegheny County and replied to my news with a tirade against the billboards that with flauntings of commercial messages were disfiguring the highways; that along Fifth Avenue were obstructing one of the most impressive vistas in our country. What an opportunity, she exclaimed, to attack the monstrosities of advertising! I was carried headlong by her vehemence, and wrote an essay—and it was a brilliant one, much colored I confess by the biting phraseology suggested by my mother—describing not the view from Soho, but the crudities of the obliterating signs. In class next day, when I was called to read my paper, I was halted after my first paragraph by Hodell's command. "That will do, Oakley. This is not the occasion to be smart." Crushed, I sat silent as my classmates, regarding me uncomprehendingly, read their descriptions of the industrial panorama, descriptions that I knew I could have bettered, descriptions I felt that had not grasped the significance of the mill-lined Monongahela. Hodell marked me zero. It is the only failure recorded against me in school or college. My mother was indignant but judged it best to withhold attack upon my teacher. I felt humiliated, tricked by fate, but despite my classmates' gibes, recovered in due season and it was not long until I was on the watch for whatever next might happen whereby I could suggest the majesty along the rivers.

As I look back to those academy years I find myself questioning the methods by which I received my early education. In the devoted teaching of my instructors was a youth-captivating spirit lacking? My thoughts were quickening. I had begun to look forward with excitement to what might be in store. What was this amazing world, this consciousness into which I had been summoned? What part was I to play in the new era symbolized by the gigantic works of men? I longed for succinct answers

Why should I study Virgil? For what reason should I be required to memorize that in 753 B.C. Rome was founded? Why was the physical prowess of my fellows so applauded, victories upon the football field acclaimed with cheers that drowned the approbations of scholarly achievement? Muscular strength I deemed of little moment. After school, while yells and noise of conflict resounded from the athletic grounds, I hastened homeward and fell to work upon my models, the last one I completed, just before my college years, being of the steamship, "Augusta Victoria," which had carried my parents and me to Norway and the North Cape.

What a miracle had been that ship! With its storm-defying hull, its pulsing might, man had belittled the reaches of the seas. Standing in her bow I had watched the mountain ranges that towered by the fjords, gazed across the Arctic waters bathed in brightness beyond credulity. It was then that my mind had seemed definitely to open and I had begun to realize the boundlessness of life. I felt myself the center of a bubble within which castles, domes, and spires beckoned. Cloud-shapes mounted to the zenith. I saw far, drifting forms attain the heavens. Were they fancies of imagination? Did they foretell the coming splendor of what man was destined to achieve, the winged ships that he would launch into the deeps of space?

Came the termination of my preparatory education, my father's death, the selling of our house, the removal of my mother and myself to Philadelphia. There we had scarcely settled when the Hoeveler warehouse in Pittsburgh where we had stored our worldly goods—including, alas, my cherished models—was gutted by fire. It was the end of our Pittsburgh epoch.

I was soon plunged into activities at college, but, absorbed as I became in my new life, never did my memories die of the flaming furnaces of Western Pennsylvania, the memories that dwelt ever in the deeper recesses of my mind, ready, whenever I beheld a scene of industry, to exert nostalgic power, memories that through the years have caused me to visit and revisit, to long again to visit the city of my birth.

I was to study architecture: that my parents had decided and I had acquiesced. It was therefore that I became a neophyte in the School of Architecture of the University of Pennsylvania, a fairly new department

of the college, but already in the fore ranks of reputation due to the gifts and zeal of the professor in charge, Warren Powers Laird. Neophyte I was not for long. As with swiftness of a dream the time sped by. All my college years are blended now in recollection into one brief period after which, crowned with two degrees of science—architecture was then classed as science, now it is termed art—I emerged triumphantly from my university career. To practice architecture? Not a bit. I became an illustrator.

What, then, is an illustrator? A friend of mine, inexperienced in the field of art, discussing the career of a mutual acquaintance, with some disdain described him thus: "He has become an illustrator, making for other peoples' texts strings of little figures for magazines." My definition of illustration, of illustration in its idealistic sense, is far above this too broadly accepted impression of a major division of the fine arts. Illustration, as I conceive it, is not only, as its name implies, a making clear pictorially. It is far more. It is a recording of ideals; a rejection of the base; a call to its beholders to press higher; an employment of visual beauty, rhythm, texture, color, light to reveal the spirituality of life. With nobility of message, which it may spread upon the pages of the books, the publications that flood the modern world, illustration, as a fine art, becomes a potent agency for the inspiration of mankind.

Howard Pyle it was to whom I am indebted for my philosophy of art. Howard Pyle! His love of man and nature had brought him to his leadership among the illustrators of his day. Never before had there been, and it is doubtful if again there will be, an era with publications as sumptuous. With eagerness the reading public awaited the appearance of the illuminated monthly magazines of that pre-first-war period—Harper's, Scribner's, the Century, and too the weekly Collier's in its early form, carrying, under the management of its founders, its magnificence of covers and of frontispieces.

During the three years following my college course I and a dozen fellow students, there in Franklin St., Wilmington, Delaware, sat Monday nights at the feet of Howard Pyle, transported, as he addressed us, to realms of spiritual liberation. Before him our pictorial efforts were displayed. Perched upon a stool, arms folded, his benign countenance bathed in yellow light from the one lamp, the background of the studio lost in inky shadow, he regarded each canvas, each drawing for a few and pregnant moments,

then poured out suggestions, that in our minds instantly became visible, of what each student might have done; of how he had not lived within the possibilities of his subject; of how he had failed to sense and to reveal its underlying, intangible significance. Not a word did he drop concerning brushes, paints, pens and inks, surface arrangements. Would that the art schools of today might thus endeavor to steer their classes into the central channel of life, where its waters, unsullied by material shores, move with grandeur toward the universal sea!

My recollections of H. P.—that is the form by which we who loved him think of the name of Howard Pyle—here sweep me forward across the years to that quarter of a century during which I myself was privileged to impart as best I might my adult philosophy to the young folk, the would-be artists, who came to me for help. It was at the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art that once a week, during those many winters, I perched upon my stool, much as my revered H. P. had sat upon his own, confronting a hundred pairs of eyes, their expressions appearing to reflect understanding of the thoughts I strove to clad in language comprehensible. William James has written that the young human mind displays an almost boundless ability of resisting knowledge. H. P. was wont to state that teaching is like the hammering by a mason of a mallet upon granite. He strikes and strikes upon the selfsame spot. The stone shows no reaction. Not until after a multitude of blows does the granite crack. So may a pupil's mind react to a teacher's message. It stirs not until the master's precepts have fallen on it in countless repetitions.

I return now to the years following my studies with Howard Pyle. It dazzled me, I doubted it were true, that the editors of the foremost monthlies of America should readily accept my drawings, commission me to fulfill my plans for pictures. That was the period not only of H. P.'s genius but of his two famed contemporaries, Edwin Austin Abbey and Joseph Pennell. That I was privileged to add my mites to magazines already rich with the giant trio's works filled my cup with an elixir that set my blood on fire. Cecilia Beaux, America's eminent woman painter, once said to me: "An artist is a minstrel singing the lay of his time." I agree, and yet there are exceptions. Curiously to relate, of those three who combined to lead the world of their day in illustration, only Joseph Pennell sang of his contemporaneous epoch, of the dawn of the era of immensities.

Pyle was steeped in the American past; Abbey, in the English<sup>3</sup>. Each spoke but rarely of the age in which he lived, yet their art lives on. Filled with sympathy for human suffering, understanding of human longing, it takes its place among the imperishable annals of our country.

It was to Pittsburgh that I turned at once to gather subjects for my pictures; to Pittsburgh, the recurring theme that beats throughout this essay; to Pittsburgh, my city that through the march of time symbolizes the quest of man, his inventions and his might, his problem to discover how control of matter shall lead him not into morasses of destruction but upward toward the stars.

One of my earliest selections of a subject for a painting was the region of the Point, where occurred pre-Revolutionary conflicts of the French and Indian wars, where still stands the first building of the settlement, the Bouquet Blockhouse. There where the rivers meet I planned my composition. There the bridges threw stupendous spans; there lay fleets of barges; there the tow-boats plied, churning the yellow water with their monster paddlewheels. Across the Monongahela, below the beetling brow of Mt. Washington, reverberated the Painter mills, pouring forth red vapor, hurling tongues of flame. I strove to capture with my brush the scale, the throb of human energy, the meaning of the toil-stained figures that came and went upon the barges, upon the shore. As I sketched and made my notes I became aware of an increasing light. As might a vast and luminous bubble, resembling that which had enveloped me upon Norwegian seas, it spread its iridescence over the material world. In it the bridges, boats, the furnaces appeared transfigured, to loom in splendor, while the waters of the river, reflecting the midday sun, flashed as though the stream were flowing jewels. Perhaps, I thought, the glory was in truth a sign from heaven, a sign that labor and Creative Spirit are but one.

My painting, entitled "Toilers of the River," was published in *Harper's Magazine* in June, 1906. What was my astonishment when, in 1942, visiting Pittsburgh, this time commissioned by the *National Geographic Magazine*, I called upon my college classmate, the mayor of the city, and beheld, hanging on the wall of his private office, the painting I had done for Harper's!

<sup>3</sup> The reader will please bear in mind that the reference here is to the art of illustration only.



I recall another unexplained happening connected with my Pittsburgh interpretations. I had, not long after I had painted my "Toilers of the River," an exhibition of charcoal drawings of city subjects that especially attracted me. It was at Wunderly's Galleries and I was delighted when my parents' friends still living and old-time schoolmates of my own attended the opening reception. One of the drawings, one of the least successful, one of my too factual efforts, was of the Allegheny Observatory beheld at twilight, behind its dome a glint of a new moon. My mother's cousin, John A. Brashear, was at that time in charge. He it was who had achieved renown both as explorer among the stars and a manufacturer of astronomical lenses, who had been acclaimed by state-wide vote as Pennsylvania's most beloved citizen. "Uncle John" was his title in Pittsburgh. "Cousin John" he was to me. I was made happy that day by his attendance, but apprehensive when I watched him examining my delineation of his dome upon the hill. I needed not to be concerned about his verdict. He came to me, his arms outstretched in congratulation. "Thank heavens, Thornton," he exclaimed, "you've got your moon right!" I beamed but was not surprised that the drawing remained unsold and found its way at length to be stored within my Philadelphia studio.

The unexplained concerning the fate of the observatory picture developed ten years later when a person, unknown to me, foreign in appearance, knocked upon my door. "Do you still have that study of the Allegheny Observatory?" he inquired, "I'd like to buy it." Dumbfounded I searched within my closet and from its dusty depths drew the drawing forth. "Its price?" my visitor asked. "Fifty dollars," I replied, but something impelled me foolishly to add, "forty for cash." The foreign-looking person drew from his pocket a bulging roll of worn, almost tattered dollar bills, many more than forty, and counting from them the number I had stated crushed them into my hand. He grasped his purchase with what seemed an avid clutch, not permitting me to clean nor wrap it, and immediately departed. "What is your name?" I cried after him, but quickening his steps he threw back at me as he disappeared: "It would not interest you."

The period of my "Toilers of the River" was that of Pittsburgh's leap to fame, fame due not only to her enormity of mills, to her roaring Bessemer, but also to the tales, the evidences of the fabulous riches of her industrial magnates. Along Fifth Avenue their palaces had sprung as if summoned



by an Aladdin's lamp of steel. It was a manifestation that could not endure. The flaunting of opulence acquired by inexorable taskmasters as they drove subservient workers became repugnant to mankind. Control of wealth, more and more severe, has caused many of the castles now to stand deserted. Some have disappeared. Names of steel captains, once luminaries in the industrial firmament, now are shadowed or extinguished by clouds of questionings, by acknowledgment of labor's rights, by new humanitarian ethics. It was during the palatial epoch that was unveiled in the Carnegie Institute the mural by Pittsburgh's acclaimed artist son, John W. Alexander. Its message was, even then, received with doubt, with exclamations of incredulity. A knight resembling Carnegie, the Pittsburgh captain of industrial captains, clad in armor, sword unsheathed, floats amidst clouds of labor, while on his head an attending figure (does it symbolize the city?) places a wreath of fame and triumph. Far, far removed from a united world is this conception of the might, the need of steel. A new-born vision is calling man to escape from bonds of violence, from belief in inevitable strife. Armaments and drawn swords no longer tell of life's ideals. Perhaps the modern age will cause to be removed this mural of a philosophy soon, I trust, to vanish from men's minds, this work of art that conducts the thoughts of its beholders along a less and less frequented road to an ultimate dead-end.

In 1910 came my marriage, and hand in hand with my radiant bride I went around the world.

As I dip into my recollections of that journey of enchantment I see again the Princess Indira of Baroda, beside whose deck chair I found mine as we sailed from London to Bombay. In sari of cloth of gold she was arrayed as though she might well have been princess from the Arabian Nights. And I behold her father, the Gaekwar, greeted as we arrived in Bombay's harbor by a salvo of welcoming guns. Bejeweled, besabered, he stepped into his waiting launch with all the arrogance of a sultan of oriental lore.

As I think of India I think of humanity's bewildering throngs; Hindu bodies brown and bare, caste marks, turbans, bangles; temples of fantastic carvings; parrots, peacocks, monkeys, zebus; sunlight unbelievable. I see myself and my new life comrade guests of the Maharana of Udaipur, swinging high above the earth in howdah of his gorgeously caparisoned elephant.

China moves before my eyes of memory a blur of blue—blue-gowned mandarins, blue-trousered women, blue-tiled temples, blue hills, blue distances of rivers, their sky-reflecting waters bearing junks whose prows, painted with cerulean eyes, stare ahead as if with consciousness, on the watch for what dire happenings the devils may have planned.

Of Japan I recall no sign that it was a nation that in fewer than four decades would be transformed into a ruthless, military power. Japan was yet almost untouched by occidental life, breathed a philosophy far removed from western thought. In my ears her temple gongs still echo. In memory I mingle with the pilgrims prostrate before the images of Buddha, of Amida, their gold, their lacquer stained by incense smoke, their eyes veiled in unfathomable contemplation. I see again the hoary cryptomeria, the gateways of the ancient torii beneath which pass the devotees of Shinto. Above all my recollections rides a vision of the sacred mountain, Fujiyama, its foundations lost in haze, its snow-crowned cone floating above earth's shadows, hovering in space as though it were the habitation of the Goddess of Celestial Light.

Home again in Philadelphia I plunged into my work. From my easel flowed a torrent of pen-drawings, charcoals, water colors in which I strove to give suggestion of oriental splendor.

But my Eastern interlude was of short duration. My oriental visions soon were blurred. In their place arose again vistas of my native city, of my country's towers. Again I heard her roar of labor, the thunder of her life. It was America that for me gave evidence of humanity's undaunted soul, not the oriental seated on his lotus flower. Not to withdraw from adventures of discovery, but to act in the drama of modernity; to command material forces that they reveal secrets of the unseen; to prove human life a spark of the fire of the Divine; to sense progression toward the Infinite—this, surely this, is the essence of man's role.

And now the fateful year, 1914, arrived and with it the outburst of destruction that rocked the foundations of so-called civilization, caused mankind to probe its inmost self to depths that had not been sounded throughout the history of the world.

I shall not dwell upon the global conflicts, nor upon the quarter of a century between the holocausts, a quarter of a century that instead of separating bound the two as one, a quarter of a century of hopes, of disillusionments, of final realization of an unterminated struggle. My theme is not destruction, not man's use of his inventive genius to resolve the world to rubble. I write of his ability to end his slavery to passion. Through the blackness of international carnage I cherished my convictions that soon the human race would press anew its search for ways that lead into the light of understanding, ways that will attain exalted heights beyond all present knowledge. In this post-war era my convictions have not been shattered. Discoveries by human research are making clear the unity of all existence. A dawn of international consciousness is dispelling the darkness of the past.

It was in 1945 that the National Geographic Society commissioned me to visit inventive and research centers of the United States, and with my brush endeavor to suggest the significance of their activities. Pittsburgh, to my delight, I found to be the heart of that area which to me most dramatically makes evident the conquests in the field of knowledge. In my mind's

eye the city's panorama gleams as though it were the highlight upon the hub of a fantastic wheel whose surrounding, irregularly distanced rim, now a few score, now hundreds of miles away, is dotted with other hives of human life, other centers where science in its fabulous workshops achieves its miracles.

Outstandingly Western Pennsylvanian are the electric shops, their circuit breakers, their lightning surges, their power transformers, their out-reaching arms discharging crashing, dazzling arcs. Too, typical of the central region of my wheel are the electric furnaces, their electrodes blazing with white heat, their gigantic masses tilting, disgorging torrents of molten steel.

Especially as I consider the world of man's modern achievements all my thoughts swing inward as if by magical attraction, by a force centripetal, to that spot in Pennsylvania where, between converging rivers, rides the city of my boyhood; her Point, a mass of industry and towers, thrust as though it were the prow of some vessel of the gods into the waters of the Ohio.

It is particularly to a hill on Pittsburgh's eastern boundary that my meditations turn. Upon its crest a bubble-like form of steel lifts its shimmering height. It seems a thing ethereal, far from machine-made metal. It looms into a blur of light and shadow that gives illusion of upward motion, as though it longed to float away, an embodiment of spirit. Upon its lofty knoll it dominates its world. Emblem of this astounding age, reflecting flashes from the sun, it not merely crowns the rolling country, looks down upon the valleys, the winding streams, the mills, but soars a culmination of man's powers of discovery. For deep within this bubble-form energies of nature, heretofore undreamed of, are unloosened and controlled; atoms are bombarded and from their nuclear centers electrons torn, whirling millions upon millions at every second's beat. Here inventive genius harnesses incalculable might.

Is it that, within this glimmering globule, this "atom-smasher," which seems about to rise into the vault of heaven, mortal man at length will find himself in touch with the mystery of the Infinite? Eras come and eras go, peoples are swept into oblivion, tragedy cloaks in darkness much of the temporal world, yet, undaunted, man ceases not his search for explana-

tion of the secrets of creation. Is it that he stands today upon Truth's threshold? Will science soon fling wide the portal that gives unto domains of the Eternal?

