

**Charles R. Knight**



*Autobiography  
of an Artist*

FOREWORD BY

**RAY BRADBURY & RAY HARRYHAUSEN**

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM STOUT

AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK SCHULTZ

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INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM STOUT

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK SCHULTZ

APPRECIATIONS BY  
JOHN FLYNN, JOHN HARRIS, MARK NORELL,  
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## *Childhood*

“See the black chicken!”

This remark, according to my father, was the first sentence I ever uttered and would seem in my case to have been prophetic. For even at the early age of two, it shows my interest in living things. The place was a small hotel known as Stockbridge’s, on Summit Lake near Central Valley, N. Y. I’d been taken there by my father and mother so that Dad might indulge in his favorite sport of angling for small mouthed black bass.

Sunday was of course Father’s free day, so the rest of the week I had to content myself as I might. Occasionally we even went to the Zoo in Central Park where the animals still occupy the same general area in which I first saw them, but then they were housed in a series of rather decrepit buildings which nevertheless persisted until a few years ago. Then our energetic Park Commissioners demolished the ancient structures and built a whole new spick and span Zoo, which in spite of its improved appearance is no better fitted as a home for wild animals. The Museum of Natural History too (at that time only a single red brick building which rose from a pile of broken rocks in the center of Manhattan Square) was naturally a Mecca for a youngster of my peculiar leanings. The long tiled Halls filled to overflowing with glassy-eyed birds and animals, each on its own mahogany base, fascinated me and we had them all to ourselves, as the Museum was not then open to the public on Sundays. Father was J. P. Morgan’s<sup>1</sup> private secretary, and the great banker was treasurer of

<sup>1</sup> John Pierpont (J. P.) Morgan (1837–1913), thanks to a head start from his father J. S. Morgan, founded J. P. Morgan & Company. It became one of the most powerful banking

the Museum, so we had weekend access while the public could go only on weekdays. I presume the taxidermy was pretty bad, and many of the specimens were old, cracked and faded, but to me they were a wonderful show, and I vastly enjoyed looking at them. I particularly remember one striking group (our only example) of an Arab camel rider being attacked by a lion. Perhaps other men my age will recall this dramatic piece which for some reason I never clearly understood was in later years given to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. I always regretted its going as it certainly was a thrilling bit of taxidermy, and only an artist could have done it. The man of course was wax, but his expression as he sat astride the camel's neck to escape the claws of the big cat was well worth seeing. A dead lioness with a little red paint for blood lay at the feet of the camel, and this artificial gore was, I fear, the cause of it being sent away, as it was thought too sensational for a staid institution like our Museum.



At six, my family — father, mother, Silver (our Skye terrier), and Tommy (our big black and white feline), and myself — moved to our new house on Lewis Avenue in Brooklyn Heights, a region at the time very poor in traffic facilities, raw and ugly, but with the advantages of plenty of light and air. Father was great on air. Being stout and as we said then full-blooded, and an Englishman, he felt the heat of this country tremendously and

houses in the world and the world's first billion-dollar corporation. In 1895 it loaned the United States government \$62 million in gold to restore the treasury surplus. A book and art collector, Morgan loaned or gave many valuables to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, of which he was president. He was also a benefactor of the American Museum of Natural History and Harvard University.

Most famous for saying "If you have to ask how much it costs, you can't afford it," the more appropriate quote as it relates to Knight's work is "Go as far as you can see; when you get there, you'll be able to see farther."

was never so happy as when he could go swimming in the ocean at Coney Island in the summertime. Our house was a small old brick two story and basement affair with a small frontyard and a big long back yard full of sunlight and ozone — especially in winter when the northwesterners simply tore across the back fences and roared so we could hardly sleep at night. Flower beds ran around three sides of our yard and Virginia Creeper covered the high board fences which separated us from our neighbors. It was a grand spot for a small boy and the neighborhood was bright and open with many lots still not built upon, but with houses going up all about us. I rejoiced in my new surroundings, now that I was growing up and could go about more by myself — across the street, around the corner — even to school across lots. It didn't take me long to find congenial companions. My next-door neighbor, Frank North, was a delicate, handsome boy, forever eating dill pickles from a brown paper parcel — sucking the salty juice in a most aggravating fashion, and dropping brine all over the place. This brown paper, a thick but porous product, had a peculiar sweetish taste (I have heard that it contained molasses) and I've certainly seen goats placidly chewing large pieces of it, evidently enjoying its succulent qualities. Frank was great on pickles, but he and I both loved candy too and he could usually wangle two cents from his mother with which we'd rush across the street to the little German grocery and purchase four Everlastings. Two white and two pink, two for him and two for me. Frank was generous, and we'd suck on them for hours. We favored molasses taffy too, and coltsfoot<sup>2</sup> from the drug store. This latter came in long fluted sticks and was soft brown in color and with a peculiar flavor. One never sees it nowadays, but even Father liked the strange exotic taste and used to buy it for me quite often on his way home from the office.

<sup>2</sup> Coltsfoot candy was made by boiling fresh leaves of the colt's foot plant and adding sugar to the extract. The roots and leaves of this perennial are also thought to have medicinal value.

When at last I was old enough to go to school, I was sent to a little private neighborhood school on Quincy Street, conducted by the Misses Richardson, two charming and very pretty young ladies who were most kind to me and whom I adored in consequence. I don't remember much about the school, except that one of the children had a sister who was a dancer. I'd never seen a real dancer before and the sight of that graceful little figure clothed in green satin trimmed with white rabbit fur thrilled me through and through. This lovely dark eyed and raven haired little sylph could really dance too; indeed, she was a professional, though naturally that didn't mean anything to me. This realization of beauty was something quite new to me, but I have always felt that the charming active little girl aroused for the first time my love of pretty things.

My eyes, I suppose, had never been of the best, as my father was very near-sighted, and I had inherited his full and astigmatic eyes. But at the age of six I was to suffer a most distressing accident, and one which was to prove a decided handicap to me through life. One day when I was playing with a boy about my own age he carelessly tossed a small pebble which struck me directly in my right eye. The blow threw me to the ground, blood burst from my eye socket, and I was carried home in a dazed condition. The doctor came at once, held up fingers which I counted to see if I still had vision and I was promptly put to bed in a darkened room. Here for six weeks I lay in a sort of misery, very little pain, but most uncomfortable, while dressings of acetate (sugar) of lead<sup>3</sup> were kept continually over my injured optic. I can still smell the disagreeable bitter earthy odor of the acetate as it assailed my nostrils night and day until the inflammation was somewhat reduced and I was at last allowed to come out once more into the light of day — but with a dark patch still over the hurt eye. This was finally removed, and I could see again, apparently almost as well as

<sup>3</sup> Lead acetate was used as an astringent to cause shrinkage of mucous membranes or exposed and damaged tissues. Current practice is to avoid contact with the eye altogether.



ever. Real damage however had been done, and the excessive inflammation set up by the blow was later to very seriously affect the vision in my right eye, thus throwing a great amount of extra work upon my left eye, which was already both near-sighted and astigmatic to a marked degree. My sight was, after all, fair, even with these handicaps, and it was not until several years later that I began to realize my inability to distinguish objects clearly at a distance. For me of course it was a catastrophe for in my chosen line as an artist I naturally needed two good eyes and here I was attempting to do difficult and intricate work with only one poor organ at the best. Also I have no doubt that the accident contributed a great deal to my later nervous condition as my vision was always under a strain which reacted upon my entire nervous system. Misfortune, however, of a much more serious kind was soon to overtake our family, for we had lived in the new house only a year or two when at Christmas time my mother suddenly became ill and died in a week from pneumonia. On that last night, as I left her bedside something must have warned her — some inkling that she would never see me again prompted her to call after me

— Good night, Charlie.

— Good night Mommy, I answered.

Fainter and fainter the voice:

— Good night Charlie.

— Good night.

— Good night.

These were her last words to her little boy for in a few hours she was past speaking.



I had made my first trip to England when Mother was living, but under the new conditions Father decided to go again and see his family in Ox-

ford. He had come to this country from the London banking house of J. S. Morgan<sup>4</sup> and Company, and every two or three years J. P. Morgan would give him a three month vacation to see his folks back home. So it was that we found ourselves once more upon the broad Atlantic on the good White Star ship "Germanic," then the crack boat of the line. She was a very long and narrow vessel, a terrific roller in a heavy sea, but fast and up-to-date for her time, reaching Liverpool in ten days out of New York if all went well. I enjoyed the trip with the exception of the excitement caused by a loose front tooth which hanging by a chord of skin I refused to have removed. Howling like a little idiot I danced about our narrow stateroom until the ship's doctor, wise in the ways of children, succeeded in fastening a string around the tooth and the other end to the door knob. Then with a quick jerk out of my mouth popped the little incisor, and it was all over but the congratulations. There were plenty of things on the ship to amuse a small boy, many other children and games galore. Also, one of the sailors decided to raffle off an old straw stuffed iguana (the big South American lizard) and I of course was crazy to take chances upon it. I wasn't lucky and was bitterly disappointed in consequence, but as a matter of fact I was the only person on the boat who really wanted the ugly thing and I would have treasured it as an addition to my Natural History Collection.

Life after we returned home was the usual quiet affair and exceedingly lonesome for me. But one Sunday when we went to church, Father was interested to see a strange lady in our pew. It was a fateful occurrence for all of us because the chance acquaintance so casually begun soon ripened into a more intimate one, and it was not long before Dad and his

<sup>4</sup> Junius Spencer (J. S.) Morgan (1813–1890) founded the house of J. S. Morgan & Co. in London, fathered J. P. Morgan, and was a partner of George Peabody, who we'll meet later as the uncle of the renowned paleontologist Othniel Charles Marsh.



*... I of course was crazy to take chances upon it.*

new found friend became engaged. Miss Sarah Davis, about 30 years old at the time, was a very clever young lady and lived with her father and mother on Lafayette Avenue, within a block or two of our house. Father was 42 at the time, and in May, 1882, they were quietly married at the home of her parents.

China painting, then all the rage, she did remarkably well, producing many lovely things in the way of decorated dinner and tea sets. This is a difficult medium, requiring much technical as well as artistic experience, but my stepmother made light of these very obvious difficulties, and went right ahead with her work in a triumphant sort of way. For me, it was a revelation to see her paint, as for the first time in my life I could really look upon an artist at work, and it naturally clarified my own leanings in that direction. From her also I for the first time heard the word "Art" at least so that it carried any real meaning, and she subscribed to the *Art Journal*, a well illustrated art periodical of the day. I read it, and as I read I dreamed, becoming slowly more conversant with the line of endeavor that I was eventually to follow. My stepmother had ideas for me as well, and she encouraged me to draw and paint on all occasions. While under her guidance I actually produced a set of little butter plates decorated with flowers and insects for my Father's birthday. Her studio also had a little what-not in one corner, whereon reposed various curios brought from one of her Cuban trips. Shells, bits of coral, starfishes, and other strange and novel things, upon all of which my youthful eyes feasted with avidity. Indeed in those first few years we got along famously together, but gradually a rift began to widen between us, a rift which grew ever wider as time went on. I am convinced that just plain jealousy played a large part in her dislike of me, though I could not very well help being my father's only child. The very thought seemed to irritate her, particularly as she was childless herself, and overweeningly ambitious and aggressive in the bargain. She was terribly spoiled too,

both by her parents and by my father, who was the type that preferred peace always at any price. This weakness she well knew and would always gain her point by making more or less of a scene at the psychological moment. Unfortunately for me I happened to be in her way so that as the years went by we became less and less friendly. If I have seemed to blame my stepmother unduly, one must not infer for a moment that the fault was all hers, because I was undoubtedly very difficult, and like many sensitive only children showed my irritation by being sulky and generally devilish. We just didn't hit it off together and finally kept out of each other's way as much as possible.

So summers of course were difficult, and there really wasn't very much to do around home in the long vacation time, but Father had a friend named Reginald Hazell, who had a place where he and Mother often went in the summer because the bass fishing was excellent. The Hazell place was a real farm several miles from Central Valley and farther east towards West Point. To reach the estate we took the old Erie train to Central Valley where Mr. Hazell's double horse team would meet us, and then followed a long hard drive up and over Bull Hill, a big rise of ground between the station and the farm. Mr. H. was an Englishman born on the West Indian Island of St. Lucia, and his wife was a charming and beautiful lady of Portuguese extraction, Miss Sarah Corvalho. They were a singularly devoted couple, childless, but very hospitable and charming hosts. I suppose I had been to their country place when I was still very young but now at nine years of age I was able to take things in very easily and to much better understand my surroundings.

Of course, it is a very abstruse subject, but as I think back upon the instruction I received in my artistic career, I can recall no single instance when a teacher thought it worthwhile to clarify the necessary steps in the making of a painting. I did, however, [at the Hazell's, and later the Peck's farm in Newtown] receive a great stimulus to the social

side of my character, because of my close contact over many years with so many different personalities. This training for an only child was invaluable because it came at a character-forming period of my life. The art of making myself useful and agreeable was rather new to me, but in such a large company of boys and girls it became an absolute necessity as willy-nilly I found myself greatly improved in this most far reaching part of one's development. Fortunately many of my friends at the farm were past masters at this sort of thing, young as they were, and from them I learned a certain expansiveness of manner which I had hitherto lacked in my dealings with others. Also, this led to a decided lessening of my bad habit of introspection, so easily formed by an only child. Indeed, there was no time for such vague and dangerous feelings, all my days being filled from morning until night with such decidedly concrete matters which were really of some importance in the general scheme, and these contributed to a sense of well being quite new in my experience.