PROLOGUE

FROM THE EARLIEST AGE, JOHN KANE SHOWED an aptitude for drawing and creativity. As a little boy growing up poor in Scotland, he loved school, but sometimes found himself distracted by the need to put down the images that floated in his mind. All his life, as he worked in one craft or another—steelworker, coal miner, bridge builder, painter—he would be captured by an image, and he always felt the need, somehow, right away, to begin getting it down on paper or canvas or board. It was a habit that stuck with him through all his days as an American workman from the 1880s to the 1920s; it started at a very young age, in elementary school in West Calder, Scotland, where he was born.

One of the images that captured him, and drew him away from his schoolwork, was of French and Prussian soldiers, which appeared in the local press during the War of 1870. As his classroom attention drifted, the young Kane began drawing his recollection of the fierce look of the warriors. He became so engrossed in his depiction of the soldiers that he never heard the teacher's cane tapping on the desk at the front of the room. When Kane finally did look up, he found that a number of other students had gathered around him to see what he was creating. And schoolmaster Walker was furious at losing control of his whole class. By the time the boy saw what was happening, it was too late: Kane had to accept his due, a half-dozen whacks to his hand from the schoolmaster's cane.

Kane's devotion to his art, and his skill as an artist, grew through the years after he emigrated to America, even as he made

his living as a workingman who struggled to find enough time to draw and paint. Although he found more and more ways to commercialize his skills, and produced more and more exceptional work, success and renown eluded him. He was always a risk taker, moving frequently and shifting professions to capitalize on the directions taken by the US economy and manufacturing. He was driven, certainly, by his own curiosity and his questing nature, but he was also driven by an escapism fueled by his addiction to drink.

No risk in all of Kane's unsettled life was more audacious than his decision, at the age at which most people are retiring from work, to try to enter his paintings into the most prestigious of American art exhibits: the Carnegie International. Shortly after its founding as the Carnegie Institute Department of Fine Arts, in 1895, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh had embarked on a journey to create an international art exhibit that would attract the best in the world. By the 1920s the annual exhibition—today known as the Carnegie International and held every four years—had become enormously influential in the art world. Many of the world's premier artists—including Mary Cassatt, James McNeill Whistler, Childe Hassam, Edward Hopper, Camille Pissarro, and John Singer Sargent—showed at the exhibition over the years. And such renowned figures as Thomas Eakins, Robert Henri, and Winslow Homer served on the juries that judged admittance of the works of the increasingly exclusive list of artists.

It was in 1925 that self-taught Pittsburgh painter John Kane tried his hand at getting some of his pictures into the exhibit.

No such luck.

Midcareer, Kane had taken his construction-trade skills into a new direction, making his living as a railcar and house painter. Around 1900, when he was working for the Pressed Steel Car Company, manufacturer of railroad cars, he soon became the company's lead painter. And, he reported later, during that time he developed a new passion, a new "love." But it wasn't painting that captured Kane; it was paint itself. "I now became in love with paint," he said, explaining his embrace of the material that enabled him to earn a living and, later, to create beautiful pictures.[1] Kane had been drawing since childhood, but now he turned his love of paint into the colorful art that would make him famous.