

Reflection

By Christina Poulin

Scholastic Art and Writing Awards - Gold Key and Silver Medal

He looks out into the crisp, silent night, watching the reflections dancing across the East River. Marred briefly by ripples in the wind, they flicker for a moment before returning to tranquil stillness. The orange bulbs of streetlamps, a soft moon, scatterings of stars...and him, leaning over the railing to peer at what lies across the water. It is only the buildings of Brooklyn, but if he closes his eyes he can almost pretend that Colette is on the other side.

He knows she is oceans away, walking the streets of Paris in a world that he has only just left and yet is already struggling to remember. He tries to blink back the tears that come to his eyes, recalling instead all the things he loves about her. Her long red hair, her laugh and how freely she smiles. Her charisma and the turn of her mouth when she is pleased. The bell-like quality of her voice and the quickness with which she passes between moods, changing like the sky, bright blue one moment and soft yellow sunset the next.

It is near midnight, perhaps past. He should be getting back, returning to *his* world, a new world where he is still a stranger, and yet it seems there is no other place for him to belong. Paris has cast him out, but it is the only place he has ever known and now he is here, crowded in with countless other immigrants, scouring the streets for a sweatshop that might take him in, him with his shabby clothes and an unfamiliar language on his tongue. He doesn't want to return to this new world. Instead, he lingers by the river, admiring the patterns the light makes on the water and thinking about Colette and the life he left behind. One day he will return. He will make sure of that. As soon as he makes enough money to do so he will board a boat back to where he came, and when he arrives she will be at the dock waiting for him, red hair flowing down to frame her beautiful face. Her lips will curve up at the corners. He will run into her arms and they will never again be separated, not because of money or class or birth. Not for anything else in the world.

He imagines this future while his hands clench the railing separating him from the river. No, he is a long ways away from this, from her. But just thinking about her gives him the strength to go on. She is all he has left, but he reminds himself that she has not been taken away. One day, he will see her again.

~ ~ ~

She peers out at the morning blooming over the Seine. A faint mist covers the surface, and as the sun slowly rises it becomes tinged with a faint pink and gold. She smiles, breathing in the crisp air that comes only with the dawning of a new day. Her long hair spills out from underneath

her hat, covering her shoulders and flowing down her back, even redder in the light. Her blue dress flutters around her ankles. She turns slowly, mischievously grinning up at her companion.

He is tall and dark, with striking features that, together with her own gentle face, make them a stunning couple. He smiles back at her, looping his arm through hers as they lean against the railing and watch the mist and river turn to gold. The secret moment they are sharing makes her heart race, and she laughs, putting a hand on his shoulder.

This is the life that she adores--slipping easily into men's lives before slipping out just as quickly. One day she will have to marry, but for now she is young and happy, happy to be with a new man every month, happy to listen to them whisper soft promises into her ear that she knows they will never keep. She enjoys the freshness of each relationship, the exhilaration of falling in love again and again, and just when her life becomes boring of being caught up in another romance.

She thinks back to a time before this man next to her came into her life; when she had thought of trying something new. She had met Claude unexpectedly, not in her sitting room waiting to accept another beau but instead out on the streets of Paris because of a broken-down motorcar and a wrong turn when she tried to continue on foot. Why not court this man, this boy, who had lived his life in poverty for a change? It was something different, something she had never done or thought of doing before, and she loves new experiences more than anything else. She loves keeping secrets too, and that was what they had done, for her parents would never have liked to see her with a boy like him. Then, just as she had started to long for someone new, he had told her that he had to leave, that his family was sending him away to America to find better work. America! It was perfection. For she had been frightened with the intensity of Claude's love for her, had begun to fear that perhaps she would not be able to simply slip out of his life as she had always done. But no, fate had called him away, and now she is here, living out a new romance with a new man. She smiles, leans against his shoulder. At last, she can begin to put Claude out of her mind.

~ ~ ~

He grips the railing, his white gloved fingers rubbing against the wood. Cheap gloves, gloves bought hurriedly before his departure so that when he last saw Colette, it would not be with bare and dirty hands. When he last saw her it was as a gentleman, when he last held her face in his hands at least he was not ashamed of his clothes next to her soft silken dresses.

The night only becomes darker, but still he does not leave the East River. He cannot bear to return to his tenement, cannot bear to return to filth and waste when memories of Colette's purity still linger in his mind. He only stares at the reflections on the water, enchanted by the silvery constellations and the golden color of the lamps lining the streets. He wonders if such beautiful riches will ever belong to him, or if he is forever sentenced to a life of cheap squalor and pathetic imitations of finery. He looks at his gloves.

In this moment, he sees nothing to live for but Colette. He tells himself that while luck is against him, his own love and hard work are overpowering. His current circumstances are only temporary, and one day, when he sees her again, all his troubles will be over.

~ ~ ~

Her gloves rest upon the shoulder of this man's finely tailored suit. White silk, perfectly fitted to her hand. She looks out on the water, a vivid, lovely gold, rippling from the wind and shrouded in mist. Her entire life has been nothing but such riches, from her large house and loving family to her fashionable clothes and abundance of ever-changing beaux.

That was why Claude was such a change for her. It was eye-opening to see the world *he* came from, a world where there was dirt in every nook and cranny and struggle just around every corner. It was wonderful, at first, to know that there was more than just her life of wealth and beauty, but then it became too much. For the first time, she didn't want something different. Claude's love was more real than anything she had ever experienced, and she didn't like it. She, who came from a world where *nothing* was truly real, not the life she lived nor the emotions she felt. There was no struggle, no risks involved; the sadnesses were brief and the joys were shallow. Finding this world where everything was tangible was simply too much for her inexperienced eyes. She loves her life of simplicity and falseness, and although she wanted Claude's love too, it came from a place in his heart that she lacked in her own. It came from the hope of something better and the want of something more, and to Claude, she was all that in herself.

But she has never hoped for anything more than a new man or a dress in the window of her favorite shop, has never wanted anything better than the life she already has. Now with Claude behind her, she can fully return to it, can go back to pretending that there is nothing beyond her own little world. She promises to herself that she will never again put herself in *his* society, will never again return to such unsettling reality. Claude is behind her now, and she will keep him there if she has to use all her strength to do so.

~ ~ ~

He forces himself to turn away from the river, to face the shadows that linger in between the buildings. For now he will have to work harder than ever, but he knows that Paris and Colette will always be waiting for him. Someday he will return, and she will be there for him, smiling like she always was, and they will continue on as though nothing had ever torn them apart. No matter what happens to him, Colette will be forever unchanged, he tells himself. His love for her will never falter, and he is sure beyond any doubt that she feels the same.