

CORRODING GOLD

Although it was only the heavy, crowded South London air that she had to breathe, she opened her mouth and lungs to it as if she loved and enjoyed it.

The school grounds, easily the most ample in the neighbourhood, were defined by a high railing and handsome iron gates, which gave the buildings quite an institutional air. No sooner had Estelle reached the gates than a man, evidently watching from the other side, crossed the roadway and advanced to meet her, with his unoccupied hand ready to raise his hat. Under one arm he carried a large flat portfolio, which might have contained drawings.

He had a tall figure, which he did not carry very well. His shoulders had the stoop of the student—a stoop that the carelessness of his dress seemed to accentuate. His face was an arresting one, being finely featured and suggestive of intellect, though it was marred by an exaggerated gravity of expression.

He was a frequent visitor at The Laurels, and Estelle's young brother Jack had attributed this gloom to the fact that he was called Eugene.

"What could you expect from a dosser called that?" he had asked with a healthy contempt, rejoicing at the same time in his own good old English name.

Estelle looked pleased—in a friendly way—to see him, but she betrayed not the smallest sign of self-consciousness or confusion. From her point of view, they were simply good comrades—nothing more. But his glance, as it rested on the trim figure and kind, strong face of Estelle Rodney, was undoubtedly eager.

She was the only woman that counted in his life, and she stood for all that womanhood can mean to an imaginative man. Estelle had no conception how Eugene Woods had idealised her. Probably she would have laughed had he told her.