

**WHEN THE
GODS LAUGHED**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649210183

When the gods laughed by Leslie Roberts

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
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First Edition

LONDON
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & CO., LTD.

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY PURNELL AND SONS
PAULTON (SOMERSET) AND LONDON



PS

8535

0239W5

PROLOGUE

ON hills much higher than those above Boulogne the Gods sit whispering, cheek to jowl, as they mould men's destinies.

Sometimes they lift a stripling beside them, cosset him, and let him stay. But more often when stalwart youths come before them—some with the rippling muscles of the pentathlon, some with books under their arms, others through the grime on whose cheeks beads of sweat trickle—the Gods laugh quietly behind their hands, like well-bred Gods, and cast them into the Melting Pot, whence few emerge.

But sometimes one will writhe as the flames lick his flesh, and see, he fights! But again he relaxes, and the Gods shrug their shoulders, while one dusts the youth's name off the Blackboard of Time. Too soon, for the youth fights again and, as he writhes, spits into the teeth of the flames.

Such a stripling the Gods will seize by the boot straps, and will lift him, ever so little, from the cauldron. So, inch by inch, now fighting, now writhing, now resting, now spitting into the teeth of the flames as he falls again to the bowl of the Pot—the youth comes forth from the

molten metal and stands once more before the Gods; not Gods who laugh behind their hands, but Gods who bind the victor's brow in laurel, with Olympian shouts, crying "Here, gentlemen, is a Man!"

BOOK ONE

WHEN THE GODS LAUGHED

CHAPTER I

I

AT the base of one of the hills above Boulogne, squatting low between the abiding place of Monsieur Dumaresq, the *marchand du vin*, and the salon of Madame Robitaille, who, for four francs, will file your nails and rub them until their moons are shining crescents, you will find a door which, as it opens, creaks on an ill-tempered hinge. Entering, you will climb a flight of stairs, the eighth and eleventh members of which groan warningly with each new footstep, as though to warn good housewife of Cedar Rapids or Glens Falls of her prowling mate's stealthy midnight return. An angled landing, whence, through another door, you will be *chez Roderigue*, where, for a consideration, you will taste sole that was steeped in nectar, and sip Château Yquem brought to mine host from just this side the Gates of Paradise.

And if, so be it, you are one of those favoured of the Gods, and trade is slack to-night, Roderigue himself may come and talk with you of other days