

CHAPTER ONE

A STILL and sultry dusk had fallen, closing an oppressive, wearing day: one of those days whose sole function seems to reside in rendering us irritably conscious of our too-close casings of too-solid flesh; whose humid and inert atmosphere, sodden with tepid moisture, clings palpably to the body, causing men to feel as if they crawled, half-suffocated, at the bottom of a sea of rarefied water.

The hour may have been eight; it may have been not quite that, but it was almost dark. The windows were oblongs black as night in the yellow walls of O'Rourke's bedchamber in the Hôtel d'Orient, Monte Carlo.

I have the honour to make known to you the O'Rourke of Castle O'Rourke in the county of Galway, Ireland; otherwise and more widely known as Colonel Terence O'Rourke; a chevalier of the Legion of Honour of France; sometime an officer in the Foreign Legion in Algiers; a wanderer, spendthrift, free-lance, cosmopolite—a gentleman-adventurer, he's been termed.

He was dressing for dinner. The glare of half a