My Personal Review:
The Black Widower acting as host for the monthly banquet at the Milano Restaurant traditionally brings a guest for grilling, which begins with the question How do you justify your existence? but ends with ferreting out some mystery to be solved. The seventh Black Widower - Henry, the waiter - always solves the problem after the other six have cleared the ground a bit.

The problem usually isn't a crime - just some little puzzle that's been driving the guest crazy. The puzzles are fair; however, be warned that some are comparable to, say, some Lord Peter Wimsey stories, in that the reader must have a smattering of history, literature, and/or popular science to have enough information to work out the answer.

Sixty Million Trillion Combinations (a.k.a. 14 Letters) - Host: Trumbull. Guest: none. Trumbull (who stipulates that he cannot justify his existence) must solve a cryptogram involving two mathematicians working for the U.S. government. The burly Sandino enjoys scoring off Pochik, who, although a brilliant mathematician, is sensitive about not having a well-rounded education. (He had to work his way through school as a waiter). Pochik, in a fit of temper, finally retaliated by yelling that he'd show who was best, when his pet project was ready for publication.

Sandino has trumped Pochik by publishing first, claiming that he reached the same conclusions independently. Pochik maintains that Sandino somehow breached his password-protected account. Trumbull's assignment is to work out what the 14-letter password is, to show how
Sandino could have cracked it among the 60 million trillion possible combinations.

The Woman in the Bar (originally published in EQMM as The Man Who Pretended to Like Baseball) - Host: Rubin. Guest: Darius Just, one of Asimov's independent characters, who also appears in MURDER AT THE ABA, who once got into trouble for an unusual reason.

The Driver - Host: Drake. Guest: Kurt Magnus, who recently attended a SETI conference at which one of the drivers may have been murdered for unwittingly uncovering a breach in security.

The Good Samaritan - Host: Gonzalo. Guest: Barbara Lindemann (Gonzalo is painting her portrait). (Since the club allows no women at their meetings, the revelation of why Gonzalo's guest is eating downstairs rather than with the club presents...difficulties.) She was so shaken at being mugged recently that she cannot remember the name and address of the young stranger who rescued her, in order to thank him.

The Year of the Action - Host: Avalon. Guest: Herb Graff, who is working with a pair of Gilbert and Sullivan enthusiasts to make an animated version of THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE. The two experts, though, are embroiled in a knock-down, drag-out argument about one small detail. As Graff points out, the Widowers have lots of stuff to fight about, so they drop each argument and get on with their lives, but these two, obsessed with only one thing, are stopped cold until they can work it out. (Graff is a real person, one of Asimov's friends.)

Can You Prove It? (a.k.a. Whats My Name?) - Host: Halsted. Guest: John Smith, who had to prove his identity after being rolled in a foreign country. He still doesn't know why the authorities suddenly accepted his story...

The Phoenician Bauble - Host: Rubin. Guest: Enrico Pavolini, whose museum purchased a spectacular artifact, which they cannot now locate because of their agents sudden death. The only clue they have is a sheet of doodling produced by the agent when he acquired the artifact.

A Monday in April - Host: Trumbull. Guest: Charles Soskind, a scholar of Slavic languages who is in love with Claire, a scholar of Romance languages. They decided to have a friendly competition to see which would have the advantage in learning Latin from a mutual friend. Claire narrowly beat him, which was OK - until he found out that she apparently opened and started on the sealed final exam on Monday the 13th of April, two days before the agreed-upon start.

Neither Brute Nor Human - Host: Drake. Guest: Jonathan Dandle, whose sister plans to leave the old family home to the Cosmic Order of Theognostics to help with their fight against the aliens that they contend are puppet masters for most of Earth's population. While Jonathan could
stand seeing the house torn down, or turned over to a respectable outfit, this sticks in his craw. His sister wont listen to Jonathan unless he can prove that he is among the enlightened rather than the possessed - so he must prove his enlightenment by working out where the aliens are from, based on some enigmatic remarks of his sisters about the nature of the aliens, and that their place of origin fits their character.

The Redhead - Host: Gonzalo. Guest: John Anderssen, whose wife claims that her spectacular red hair is a sign of magical powers. After an argument one evening outside a restaurant, she stormed away from him and into the building - he followed her, only to find that she had vanished. She wont tell him how she did it.

The Wrong House - Host: Avalon. Guest: Chris Levan, who lives in a small subdivision of (outwardly) identical houses. He came home drunk from a college reunion one night, and walked into a kitchen in which strangers were divvying up counterfeit money. They knocked him out, and he woke up on his own doorstep. As a bank manager, hes desperate to work out which house it was that he walked into that night.

The Intrusion - Host: Halsted. Guest: Haskell Pritchard, who doesnt have a problem - but young Russo, who bursts in on the banquet to ask for help, does. Hes looking for the creep who picked up his sweet, lovely, and mentally retarded sister Susan one afternoon, but all he has is what she told him about the guys fancy house: Its named for me and for you.

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