

The Perfectionist

by Peter Lovesey, 1936–

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The invitation dropped on the doormat of The Laurels along with a bank statement and a Guide Dogs for the Blind appeal. It was in a cream-coloured envelope made from thick, expensive-looking paper. Duncan left it to open after the others. His custom was to leave the most promising letters while he worked steadily through the others, using a paper knife that cut the envelopes tidily. Eventually he took out a gold-edged card with his name inscribed in the centre in fine italic script. It read:

*The most perfect club in the world
has the good sense to invite
Mr. Duncan Driffield
a proven perfectionist
to be an honoured guest at its biannual dinner
Friday, January 31st, 7:30 for 8pm
Contact will be made later*

He was wary. This could be an elaborate marketing ploy. In the past he'd been invited-by motor dealers and furniture retailers—to parties that had turned out to be sales pitches, nothing more. Just because no product or company was mentioned, he wasn't going to be taken in. He read the invitation through several times. It has to be said, he liked the designation „a proven perfectionist“. Couldn't fault their research. He was a Virgo-orderly, a striver for perfection. To see this written down as if he'd already achieved the ideal was especially pleasing. And to see his name in such elegant script was another fine touch.

Yet it troubled him that the club was not named. Nor was there an address, nor any mention of where the function was to be held. Being a thorough and cautious man, he would normally have looked these things up before deciding what to do about the invitation.

The phone call came about 8:30 the next evening. A voice that didn't need to announce it had been to a very good school spoke his name.

„Yes?“

„You received an invitation to the dinner on January 31st, I trust?“

„Which invitation was that?“ Duncan said as if he received invitations by every post.

„A gold-edged card naming you a proven perfectionist. May we take it that you will accept?“

„Who are you, exactly?“

„A group of like-minded people. We know you'll fit in.“

„Is there some mystery about it? I don't wish to join the Freemasons.“

„We're not Freemasons, Mr. Driffield.“

„How did you get my name?“

„It was put to the committee. You were the outstanding candidate.“

„Really?“ He glowed inwardly before his level-headedness returned.

„Is there any obligation?“

„You mean are we trying to sell something? Absolutely not.“

„I don't have to make a speech?“

„We don't go in for speeches. It isn't like that at all. We'll do everything possible to welcome you and make you feel relaxed. Transport is provided.“

„Are you willing to tell me your name?“

„Of course. It's David Hopkins. I do hope you're going to say yes.“

Why not, he thought. „All right, Mr. Hopkins.“

„Excellent. I'm sure if I ask you to be ready at 6:30, that as a proven perfectionist, you will be—to the minute. In case you were wondering, it's a dinner jacket and black tie affair. I'll come for you myself. The drive takes nearly an hour at that time of day, I'm afraid. And it's Dr. Hopkins actually, but please call me David.“

After the call, Duncan, in his systematic way, tried to track down David Hopkins in the phone directory and the Medical Register. He found three people by that name and called them on the phone, but their voices had nothing like the honeyed tone of the David Hopkins he had spoken to.

He wondered who had put his name forward. Someone must have. It would be interesting to see if he recognised David Hopkins.

He did not. Precisely on time, on the last Friday in January, Dr. David Hopkins arrived—a slim, dark man in his forties, of average height. They shook hands.

„Is there anything I can bring? A bottle of whisky?“

„No. You're our guest, Duncan.“

He liked the look of David. He felt that an uncommonly special evening was in prospect.

They walked out to the car—a large black Daimler, chauffeur-driven.

„We can enjoy the wine with a clear conscience,“ David explained, „but I would be dishonest if I led you to think that was the only reason we are being driven.“

When they were both inside, David leaned across and pulled down a blind. There was one on each window and across the partition between the driver and themselves. Duncan couldn't see out at all. „This is in your interest.“

„Why is that?“

„We ask our guests to be good enough to respect the privacy of the club. If you don't know where we meet, you can't upset anyone.“

„I see. Now that we're alone, and I'm committed to coming, can you tell me some more?“

„A little. We're all of your cast of mind, actually.“

„Perfectionists?“

He smiled. „That's one of our attributes.“

„I wondered why I was asked. Do I know any of the members?“

„I doubt it.“

„Then how...“

„Your crowning achievement.“

Duncan tried to think which achievement could have come to their notice. He'd had an unremarkable career in the civil service. Sang a bit with a local choir. Once won first prize for his sweet peas in the town flower show, but he'd given up growing them now. He could think of nothing of enough merit to interest this high-powered club.

„How many members are there?“

„Fewer than we would like. Not many meet the criteria.“

„So how many is that?“

„Currently, five.“

„Oh—as few as that?“

„We're small and exclusive.“

„I can't think why you invited me.“

„It will become clear.“

More questions from Duncan elicited little else, except that club had been in existence for over a hundred years. He assumed—but had the tact not to ask—that he would be invited to join if the members approved of him that evening. How he wished he was one of those people with a fund of funny stories. He feared he was dull company.

In just under the hour, the car came to a halt and the chauffeur opened the door. Duncan glanced about him as he stepped out, wanting to get some sense of where he was. It was dark, of course, but they were clearly in a London square—with street lights, a park in the centre, and plane trees at intervals in front of the houses. He couldn't put a name to it. The houses were terraced, and Georgian, just as they are in almost every other London square.

„Straight up the steps,“ said David. „The door is open.“

They went in, through a hallway with mirrors, brightly lit by a crystal chandelier. The dazzling effect, after the dim lighting in the car, made him

blink. David took Duncan's coat and handed it to a manservant and then opened a door.

„Gentlemen,“ he said. „May I present our guest, Mr. Duncan Driffield.“

It was a smallish anteroom, and four men stood waiting with glasses of wine. Two looked quite elderly, the others about forty or so. One of the younger men was wearing a kilt.

The one who was probably the senior member extended a bony hand. „Joe Franks. I'm president, through a process of elimination.“

There were some smiles at this that David didn't fully understand.

Joe Franks went on to say, „I qualified for membership in 1934, when I was only nineteen, but I didn't officially join until after the war.“

David, at Duncan's side, murmured something that made no sense about a body left in a trunk at Brighton railway station.

„And this well set-up fellow on my right,“ said Joe Franks, „is Wally Winthrop, the first private individual to put ricin to profitable use. Wally now owns one of the largest supermarket chains in Europe.“

„Did you say rice?“ asked Duncan.

„No, ricin. A vegetable poison.“

It was difficult to see the connection between a vegetable poison and a supermarket chain. Wally Winthrop grinned and shook Duncan's hand.

„Tell you about it one of these days,“ he said.

Joe Franks indicated the man in the kilt. „Alex McPhee is our youngest member and our most prolific. Is it seven, Alex?“

„So far,“ said McPhee, and this caused more amusement.

„His skene-dhu has more than once come to the aid of the club,“ added Joe Franks.

Duncan wasn't too familiar with Gaelic, but he had a faint idea that the skene-dhu was the ornamental dagger worn by a Highlander in his stocking. He supposed the club used this one as part of some ritual.

„And now meet Michael Pitt-Struthers, who advises the SAS on the martial arts. His knowledge of pressure points is unrivalled. Shake hands very carefully with Michael.“

More smiles, the biggest from Pitt-Struthers, who squeezed Duncan's hand in a way that left no doubt as to his expertise.

„And of course you've already met our doctor member, David Hopkins, who knows more about allergic reactions than any man alive.“

With a huge effort to be sociable, Duncan remarked, „Such a variety of talents. I can't think what you all have in common.“

Joe Franks answered, „Each of us has committed a perfect murder.“

Duncan played the statement over in his head. He thought he'd heard it right. It had been spoken with some pride. This time no one smiled. More disturbingly, no one disputed it.

„Shall we go in to dinner, gentlemen?“ Joe Franks suggested.

At a round table in the next room, Duncan tried to come to terms with the sensational claim he had just heard. If it was true, what on earth was he doing sharing a meal with a bunch of killers? And why had they chosen to take him into their confidence? If he shopped them to the police, they wouldn't be perfect murderers any longer. Maybe it was wise not to mention this while he was seated between the martial arts expert and the Scot with the skene-dhu tucked into his sock.

The wineglasses were filled with claret by an elderly waiter.

„Hungarian,“ Joe Franks confided. „He understands no English.“ He raised his glass. „At this point, gentlemen, I propose a toast to Thomas de Quincey, author of that brilliant essay, *On Murder, Considered as one of the Fine Arts*, who esteemed the killing of Sir Edmund Godfrey as the finest work of the eighteenth century for the excellent reason that no one was able to determine who had done it.“

„Thomas de Quincey,“ said everyone, with Duncan just a half-beat slower than the rest.

„You’re probably wondering what brings us together,“ said Wally Winthrop across the table. „You might think we’d be uncomfortable sharing our secrets. In fact, it works the other way. It’s a tremendous relief. I don’t have to tell you, Duncan, what it’s like after you commit your first—living in fear of being found out, waiting for the police siren and the knock on the door. As the months pass, this panicky stage fades and is replaced by a feeling of isolation. You’ve set yourself apart from others by your action. You can only look forward to keeping your secret bottled up for the rest of your life. It’s horrible. We’ve all been through it. Five years have to pass—five years without being charged with murder—before you’re contacted by the club and invited to join us for a meal.“

David Hopkins briskly took up the conversation. „It’s such a break in the clouds, to discover that you’re not alone in the world. To find that what you’ve done is valued, in some circles, as an achievement which can be openly discussed. Wonderful. After all, there is worth in having committed a perfect murder.“

„How do you know you can trust each other?“ Duncan asked, without giving anything away.

„Mutual self-interest. If any one of us betrayed the others, he’d take himself down as well. We’re all in the same boat.“

Joe Franks explained, „It’s a safeguard that’s worked for over a hundred years. One of our first members was the man better known as Jack the Ripper, who was, in fact, a pillar of the establishment. If his identity could be protected all these years, then the rest of us can breathe easy.“

„That’s amazing. You know who the Ripper was?“

„Aye,“ said McPhee calmly. „And no one has ever named the laddie.“

„Can I ask?“

„Not till you join,“ said Joe Franks.

Duncan hesitated. He was about to say he had no chance of joining, not having committed a murder, when some inner voice prompted him to shut up. These people were acting as if he was one of them. Maybe, through some ghastly mistake, they’d been told he’d once done away with a fellow human being. And maybe it was in his interest not to disillusion them.

„We have to keep to the rules,“ Wally Winthrop was explaining.

„Certain information is only passed on to full members.“

Joe Franks added, „And we are confident you will want to join. All we ask is that you respect the rules. Not a word must be spoken to anyone else about this evening, or the existence of the club. The ultimate sanction is at our disposal for anyone foolish enough to betray us.“

„The ultimate sanction—what’s that?“ Duncan huskily enquired.

No one answered, but the Scot beside him grinned in a way Duncan didn’t care for.

„The skene-dhu...?“ said Duncan.

„...or the pressure point,“ said Joe Franks, „or the allergic reaction, or whatever we decide is tidiest. But it won't happen in your case.“

„No chance,“ Duncan affirmed. „My lips are sealed.“

The starters were served, and he was pleased when the conversation shifted to murders in fiction, and some recent crime novels. Faintly he listened as they discussed *The Silence of the Lambs*, but he was trying to think what to say if someone asked about the murder he was supposed to have committed. They were sure to return to him before the evening ended, and then it was essential to sound convincing. If they got the idea he was a mild man who wouldn't hurt a fly he was in real trouble.

Towards the end of the meal, he spoke up. It seemed a good idea to take the initiative. „This has been a brilliant evening. Is there any chance I could join?“

„You've enjoyed yourself?“ said Joe Franks. „That's excellent. A kindred spirit.“

„It will take more than that for you to become a member,“ Winthrop put in. „You've got to provide some evidence that you're one of us.“

Duncan swallowed hard. „Don't you have that? I wouldn't be here if you hadn't found something out.“

„There's a difference between finding something out and seeing the proof.“

„That won't be easy.“

„It's the rule.“

He tried another tack. „Can I ask something? How did you get on to me?“

There were smiles all round. Winthrop said, „You're surprised that we succeeded where the police failed?“

„Experience,“ Joe Franks explained. „We're much better placed than the police to know how these things are done.“

Pitt-Struthers—the strong, silent man who advised the SAS—said, „We know you were at the scene on the evening it happened, and we know no one else had a stronger motive or a better opportunity.“

„But we must have the proof,“ insisted Winthrop.

„The weapon,“ suggested McPhee.

„I disposed of it,“ Duncan improvised. He was not an imaginative man, but this was an extreme situation. „You would have, wouldn't you?“

„No,“ said McPhee. „I just give mine a wee wipe.“

„Well, it's up to you, old boy,“ Winthrop told Duncan. „Only you can furnish the evidence.“

„How long do I have?“

„The next meeting is in July. We'd like to confirm you as a full member then.“

The conversation moved on to other subjects and then a lengthy discussion ensued about the problems faced by the Crown Prosecution Service.

The evening ended with coffee, cognac and cigars. Soon after, David Hopkins said that the car would be outside.

On the drive back, Duncan, deeply perturbed and trying not to show it, pumped David for information.

„It was an interesting evening, but it's left me with a problem.“

„What's that?“

„I—eh—wasn't completely sure which murder of mine they were talking about.“

„Do you mean you're a serial killer?“

Duncan gulped. He hadn't meant that at all. „I've never thought of myself as one.“ Recovering his poise a little, he added, „A thing like that is all in the mind, I suppose. Which one do they have me down for?“

„The killing of Sir Jacob Drinkwater at the Brighton Civil Service Conference in 1995.“

Drinkwater. He had been at that conference. He remembered hearing that the senior civil servant at the Irish Office had been found dead in his hotel room on that Sunday morning. „That was supposed to have been a heart attack.“

„Officially, yes,“ said David.

„But you heard something else?“

„I happen to know the pathologist who did the autopsy. A privileged source. They didn't want the public knowing that Sir Jacob had actually been murdered, and what means the killer had used, for fear of creating a terrorism panic. How did you introduce the cyanide? Was it in his aftershave?“

„Trade secret,“ Duncan answered cleverly.

„Of course the security people in their blinkered way couldn't imagine it was anything but a political assassination. They didn't know you'd had a grudge against him dating from years back, when he was your boss in the Land Registry.“

Someone had their wires crossed. It was a man called Charlie Drinkwater who'd made Duncan's life a misery and blighted his career. No connection with Sir Jacob. Giving nothing away, he said smoothly, „And you worked out that I was at the conference?“

„Same floor. Missed the banquet on Saturday evening, giving you a fine opportunity to break into his room and plant the cyanide. So we have motive, opportunity...“

„And means?“ said Duncan.

David laughed. „Your house is called *The Laurels*, for the bushes all round the garden. It's well known that if you soak laurel leaves and evaporate the liquid, you get a lethal concentration of cyanide. Isn't that how you made the stuff?“

„I'd rather leave you in suspense,“ said Duncan. He was thinking hard. „If I apply to join the club, I may give a demonstration.“

„There's no if about it. They liked you. You're expected to join.“

„I could decide against it.“

„Why?“

„Private reasons.“

David turned to face him, his face creased in concern. „They'd take a very grave view of that, Duncan. We invited you along in good faith.“

„But no obligation, I thought.“

„Look at it from the club's point of view. We're vulnerable now. You're dealing with dangerous men, Duncan. I can't urge you strongly enough to co-operate.“

„But if I can't prove that I killed a man?“

„You must think of something. We're willing to be convinced. If you could shoulder us, or betray us, I can't answer for the consequences.“

A sobering end to the evening.

For the next three weeks he got little sleep, and when he did drift off he would wake with nightmares of fingers pressing on his arteries or skene-dhus being thrust between his ribs. He faced a classic dilemma. Either admit he

hadn't murdered Sir Jacob Drinkwater—which meant he was a security risk to the club—or concoct some fake evidence, bluff his way in, and spend the rest of his life hoping they wouldn't find him out. Faking evidence wouldn't be easy. They were intelligent men.

„You must think of something,“ David Hopkins had urged.

Being methodical, he went to the British Newspaper Library and spent many hours rotating the microfilm, studying accounts of Sir Jacob's death. It only depressed him more, reading about the involvement of Special Branch, the Anti-Terrorist Squad and MI5 in the official investigation. Nothing he had read, up to and including the final pronouncement in the papers that the death had been ruled a heart attack and the investigation closed, proved helpful to him. How in the world would he be able to acquire the evidence the club insisted on seeing?

More months went by.

Duncan weighed the possibility of pointing out to the members that they'd made a mistake. Surely, he thought (in rare optimistic moments), they would see that it wasn't his fault. He was just an ordinary bloke caught up in something out of his league. He could promise not to say anything to anyone, in return for a guarantee of personal safety. Then he remembered the eyes of some of those people around the table, and he knew how unrealistic that idea was.

One morning in May, out of desperation, he had a brilliant idea. It arose from something David Hopkins had said in the car on the way home from the club: „Do you mean you're a serial killer?“ At the time it had sounded preposterous. Now, it could be his salvation. Instead of striving to link himself to the murder of Sir Jacob, he would claim another killing—and show them some evidence they couldn't challenge. He'd satisfy the rules of the club and put everyone at their ease.

The brilliant part was this. He didn't need to kill anyone. He would claim to have murdered some poor wretch who had actually committed suicide. All he needed was a piece of evidence from the scene. Then he'd tell the Perfectionists he was a serial killer who dressed up his murders as suicides. They would be forced to agree how clever he was and admit him to the club. After a time, he'd give up going to the meetings and no one would bother him because they'd think their secrets were safe with him.

It was just a matter of waiting. Somebody, surely, would do away with himself before the July meeting of the club.

Each day Duncan studied *The Telegraph*, and no suicide—well, no suicide he could claim was a murder—was reported. At the end of June, he found an expensive-looking envelope on his doormat and knew with a sickening certainty who it was from.

*The most perfect club in the world
takes pleasure in inviting
Mr. Duncan Driffield
a prime candidate for membership
to present his credentials
after dinner on July 19th, 7:30 for 8pm
Contact will be made later*

This time the wording didn't pamper his ego at all. It filled him with dread. In effect it was a sentence of death. His only chance of a reprieve rested on some fellow creature committing suicide in the next two weeks.

He took to buying three newspapers instead of one, still with no success. It seemed as if there was no way out. Mercifully, and in the nick of time, however, his luck changed. News of a suicide reached him, but not through the press. He was phoned on the afternoon of the 19th by an old civil service colleague, Harry Hitchman. They'd met occasionally since retiring, but they weren't the closest of buddies, so the call came out of the blue.

„Some rather bad news,“ said Harry. „Remember Billy Fisher?“

„Of course I remember him,“ said Duncan. „We were in the same office for twelve years. What's happened?“

„He jumped off a hotel balcony last night. Killed himself.“

„Billy? I can't believe it!“

„Nor me when I heard. Seems he was being treated for depression. I had no idea. He was always cracking jokes in the office. A bit of a comedian, I always thought.“

„They're the people who crack, aren't they? All that funny stuff is just a front. His wife must be devastated.“

„That's why I'm phoning round. She's with her sister. She understands that everyone will be wanting to offer sympathy and help if they can, but for the present she'd like to be left to come to terms with this herself.“

„Okay.“ Duncan hesitated. „This happened only last night, you said?“

Already, an idea was forming in his troubled brain.

„Yes. He was staying overnight at some hotel in Mayfair. A reunion of some sort.“

„Do you happen to know which one?“

„Which reunion?“

„No. Which hotel.“

„The Excelsior... 1313. People talk about thirteen being unlucky. It was in Billy's case.“

Sad as it was, this had to be Duncan's salvation. Billy Fisher was as suitable a murder victim as he could have wished for. Someone he'd actually worked with. He could think of a motive later—make up some story of an old feud. For once in his life, he needed to throw caution to the winds and act immediately. The police would have sealed Billy's hotel room pending some kind of investigation. Surely a proven perfectionist could think of a way to get inside and pick up some personal item that would pass as evidence that he had murdered his old colleague.

He took the 5:25 to London. Most of the other travellers were going up to town for an evening's entertainment. Duncan sat alone, avoiding eye contact and working out his plan. Through the two-hour journey he was deep in concentration, applying his brain to the challenge. By the time they reached Waterloo, he knew exactly what to do.

A taxi ride brought him to the hotel, a high-rise building near Shepherd Market. He glanced up, counted the wrought-iron balconies until he reached number thirteen, and thought of Billy's leap. Personally, he wouldn't have gone up so high. A fall from the sixth floor would have done the job just as well, and more quickly, too.

Doing his best to look like one of the guests, he walked briskly through the revolving doors into the spacious, carpeted foyer and over to the lift, which was waiting unoccupied. No one gave him a second glance. It was a huge relief when the door slid across and he was alone and rising.

So far, the plan was working beautifully. He got out at the 12th level and used the stairs to reach the 13th. It was now around 7:30, and he was wary of meeting people on their way out to dinner. He paused on the landing to let a couple pass by him on their way downstairs. They didn't seem to notice him. He moved along, looking for room 1313.

There it was. He had found Billy Fisher's hotel room. No policeman was on duty outside. What a stroke of luck, thought Duncan, it wasn't even as if a man had killed himself in there.

He went back down to the foyer, marched coolly up to the desk and looked at the pigeonhole system where the keys were kept. He'd noticed before how automatically reception staff hand over keys when asked. The key to 1313 was in place. Duncan didn't ask for it. 1311—the room next door—was also available and he was given its key without fuss.

Up on the 13th floor again, he let himself into 1311, taking care not to leave fingerprints. His idea was to get out on the balcony and climb across the short gap to the balcony of 1313. No one would suspect an entry by that route.

The plan had worked brilliantly up to now. The curtains were drawn in 1311. He didn't switch on the light, thinking he could cross to the window and get straight out to the balcony. Unfortunately his foot caught against a suitcase some careless guest had left on the floor. He stumbled, and was horrified to hear a female voice from the bed call out, „Is that you, Elmer?“

Duncan froze. This wasn't part of the plan. The room should have been unoccupied. He'd collected the key from downstairs.

The voice spoke again. „Did you get the necessary, honey? Did you have to go out for it?“

Duncan was in turmoil, his heart thumping. The plan hadn't allowed for this.

„Why don't you put on the light, Elmer?“ the voice said. „Now I'm in bed I don't mind. I was only a little shy of being seen undressing.“

What could he do? If he spoke, she would scream. Any minute now, she would reach for the bedside switch. The plan had failed. His one precious opportunity of getting off the hook was gone.

„Elmer?“ The voice was suspicious now.

In the civil service, there had been a procedure for everything. Duncan's home life was similar—well ordered and structured. Now he was floundering, and next he panicked. Take control, something inside him urged. Take control, man. He groped his way to the source of the sound, snatched up a pillow and smothered the woman's voice. There were muffled sounds, and there was struggling, and he pressed harder. And harder. And finally it all stopped.

Silence.

He could think again, thank God, but the realisation of what he had done appalled him.

He'd killed someone. He really had killed someone now.

His brain reeled and pulses pounded in his head and he wanted to break down and sob. Some instinct for survival told him to think, think, think.

By now, Elmer must have returned to the hotel to be told the room key had been collected. They'd be opening the door with a master key any minute.

Must get out, he thought.

The balcony exit was still the safest way to go. He crossed the room to the glass doors, slid them across and looked out.

The gap between this balcony and that of 1313 was about a metre—not impossible to bridge, but daunting when you looked down and thought of Billy Fisher hurtling towards the street below. In his agitated state, however Duncan didn't hesitate. He put a foot on the rail and was up and over and across. Just as he'd hoped, the doors to the balcony of 1313 were unfastened. He slid them open and stepped inside. And the light came on.

Room 1313 was full of people. Not policemen or hotel staff, but people who looked familiar, all smiling.

One of them said, „Caught you, Duncan. Caught you good and proper, my old mate.“ It was Billy Fisher, alive and grinning all over his fat face.

Duncan said, „You're...“

„Dead meat? No. You've been taken for a ride, old chum. Have a glass of bubbly, and I'll tell you all about it.“

A champagne glass was put in his shaking hand. Everyone closed in, watching his reaction—as if it mattered. Their faces looked strangely familiar.

„Wondering where you've seen them before?“ said Billy. „They're actors, mostly, earning a little extra between engagements. You know them better as the Perfectionists. They look different out of evening dress, don't they?“

He knew them now: David Hopkins, the doctor; McPhee, the skene-dhu specialist; Joe Franks, the trunk murderer; Wally Winthrop, the poisoner; and Pitt-Struthers, the martial arts man. In jeans and T-shirts and a little shame-faced at their roles in the deception, they looked totally unthreatening.

„You've got to admit it's a brilliant con,“ said Billy. „Retirement is so boring. I needed to turn my organising skills to something creative, so I thought this up. Mind, it had to be good to take you in.“

„Why me?“

„Well, I knew you were up for it from the old days, and Harry Hitchman—where are you, Harry?“

A voice from the background said, „Over here.“

„I knew Harry wouldn't mind playing along. So I rigged it up. Did the job properly. Civil service training. Got the cards printed nicely. Rented the private car and the room and hired the actors and stood you all a decent dinner. I was the Hungarian waiter, by the way, but you were too preoccupied with the others to spot me in my false moustache. And when you took it all in as I knew you would—being such a serious-minded guy—it was worth every penny. I wanted to top it with a wonderful finish, so I dreamed up the suicide,“ he quivered with laughter.

„You knew I'd come up here?“

„It was all laid out for your benefit, old sport. You were totally taken in by the perfect murder gag, and you were bound to look for a get out, so I fabricated one for you. Harry told you I'd jumped off the balcony, and when you asked in which hotel, I knew you took the bait.“

„Bastard,“ said Duncan.

„Yes, I am,“ said Billy without apology. „It's my second career.“

„And the woman in the room next door—is she an actress, too?“

„Which woman?“

„Oh, come on,“ said Duncan. „You've had your fun.“

Billy was shaking his head. „We didn't expect you to come through the room next door. Is that how you got on the balcony? Typical Duncan Driffield, going the long way round. Which woman are you talking about?“

From the corridor outside came the sound of hammering on a door.

Duncan covered his ears.

„What's up with him?“ said Billy.

