

JULIAN SYMONS

THE BEST CHESS PLAYER IN THE WORLD

'All I ask is value for money,' George Bernard Shaw said.

The man on the other side of the desk, whose name was Roberts, shuffled his feet and looked miserable.

Shaw had been given those first names by his parents, because it was on the night of a visit to *Arms and the Man* that he had been conceived. Others might have flinched from the names, but he had accepted them even at school, and for years now had taken pleasure in using the full name, or for preference the magic initials. He regarded himself as a disciple of the original George Bernard Shaw, who in his eyes had not been a visionary socialist but a ruthless realist, fighting battles in his dealings with theatre producers, publishers, women, battles which he always won. The original Shaw had been, as he saw it, a man with cranky ideas which he cleverly exploited in plays to make himself a lot of money. In life, however, he had been a logical man, and the later GBS prided himself on being logical too.

He was twenty-five when he inherited from his father a small family printing firm and a couple of weekly local papers. The local papers were now a flourishing chain of thirty, that covered the Midlands and extended up into Yorkshire and Lancashire. The printing works had enlarged with the papers.

Success had not been achieved without some difficulties, as is the way of life. There had been problems with wholesalers in some areas, people who complained that GBS gave much poorer terms than his competitors, and so refused to stock his papers. These wholesalers found their vans damaged through slashed tyres, sand in the tank, and

other means. Their warehouses also suffered burglaries, in which stock was damaged or destroyed. Such difficulties ceased when they handled, and pushed, GBS papers.

Then there were union problems at the works. GBS always refused to employ union members, and the local branches threatened to black him. The two union secretaries who had led the blacking movement were badly beaten up, one sustaining several broken ribs and the other a hip injury that left him permanently lame. Half a dozen other militants suffered similar, although less severe attacks, and eventually GBS's firm was left alone. He was the ruler of his world, and the feeling was enjoyable. The interview with Roberts took place because it was understood that GBS was the last court of appeal. Roberts, when sacked, had gone to the top man.

'Value for money,' GBS said. 'And from the reports on the table here I'm not getting it.'

'I've been here more than twenty years.'

'Twenty-two. What then?'

'Now I'm to be turned off with a month's notice.'

'You feel you are being badly treated? Let us consider.' There was nothing he enjoyed more than an argument of this kind, in which he held all the trump cards. 'You came here and stayed here of your own free will. You worked as a packer and a machine hand, jobs that required no tradesman's skills, but still you were paid more than you would have been in a union shop. Your job, however, while involving no special skill, did demand that you should stand up at work. You tell me this is impossible -'

'It's my leg, my arthritis. You'd never believe the pain. The specialist, he says I must sit down, not all day, I got to keep moving, but just sit down sometimes, every half hour. Standing's the worst thing for it, standing all day.' Roberts was a small man with a drooping moustache. He spoke with the nasal whine of the area.

'Then of course you must sit down. But that means you are unable to do your job here.'

'I'm being thrown on the scrapheap. No pension, nothing.'

'You knew there was no pension scheme when you came -'

'I was young then, never thought about it.'

'Please do not interrupt. You should have thought, you should have saved money. Now you must look for another job.'

'With my leg, and me forty-seven years old, and unemployment what it is, what chance have I got? You could find me another job here, something behind a desk, easy enough if you wanted.'

GBS never ceased to be polite, but now he allowed his impatience to show. 'Why should I do that? The reports I have here don't suggest that you would be able to handle such work. You have never worked behind a desk, you would be useless, and we are not a charity. You must be logical, Mr Roberts. Value for money is the rule between employer and employed. If you felt you were worth more than we paid you, you were free to take another job. Now you are no longer giving value for money. What more is there to say?'

Roberts found other things to say, abusive and illogical things to which GBS paid no attention. He would not have admitted even to himself that he enjoyed such interviews, but he always found pleasure in pointing out that the value for money argument was irrefutable. The pleasure lasted during half of the forty minute drive home. Then he began to think about Paula.

He had married Paula ten years ago, when he was thirty-five and she ten years younger. For some time he had felt no need to marry. He had a flat in the heart of the city, and when it was necessary to entertain for business

purposes, a local firm sent in an excellent cook, and a maid to serve the meal. Then he had interests, apart from the firm, that kept him busy. He acknowledged the need to keep fit, and like his namesake was a useful boxer. Games seemed to him ridiculous, but he understood that they could be useful in business terms, and made himself into an efficient golfer, particularly on the greens, since putting seemed to him the most logical part of the game. He went often to race meetings, where he was a heavy punter. Was that illogical? Not so, for his bets were in the service of the Emergency Fund. When he won he was paid in cash, and the money went straight into a safe deposit account in London. This was the Emergency Fund. It had been used on several occasions when the use of cheques would have been inadvisable.

He acknowledged also the need for sex. He took girls out, sometimes for a day at the races, sometimes for dinner. Either way they ended up in bed at the flat, a result he felt essential to justify the time and money spent. A time came, however, when to his own surprise he found all this unsatisfactory. He felt the need for a house of his own, for somebody to arrange those dinners, and to sit at one end of the table. A number of business acquaintances raised their eyebrows when they found that there was no hostess at his dinners, and he knew that there were always whispers about bachelors. Then again, a good deal of trouble in the sexual line would be saved if he had a wife. It would be a practical arrangement, she would be value for money. The right kind of wife, of course, somebody who looked on marriage as logically as he did himself.

He met Paula Mountford at a party, asked her to dinner and to the theatre, but made no attempt to take her to bed. He decided that she filled the bill perfectly. She was the younger daughter of a county family that had come down in the world, good-looking enough in a slightly

awkward, big-boned way, and adept in keeping her conversational end up in any sort of company. She was also a girl with an eye on the main chance, something that was evident when he took her back to the flat, kissed her, and suggested that they should get married.

'You aren't in love with me.'

'I don't talk about love, it's an abstraction. I find you attractive, and we seem to get on well.'

'Well enough,' she said coolly. She had a thick underlip, and it was stuck out now. 'I don't love you, I'm not sure that I like you very much, but you're certain of yourself, you go out for what you want, and I admire that. At the moment you seem to want me. I suppose I should be flattered.'

'I'm glad you're sensible.'

'Not much use being anything else when you're around,' she said with a laugh.

'I've got no time for romance, it seems to me nonsense. I think you should consider whether the advantages of being married to me are enough for you.'

'All right. I'll tell you what I want. A wedding in style, church not registry office, no expense spared. A house outside the city, I hate bricks and mortar all round me. An acre or so of garden. My own car, a runabout. A couple of horses, I want to keep up my hunting. Good for your image to have a wife who hunts. A big dog, retriever or a labrador. A clothes account up in London, no complaints about how much I spend. That's all at the moment, though I shall think of other things I'm sure. In return I'll grace your table and share your bed. I don't suppose you want children?' He shook his head. 'Luckily I'm not mad about them either.'

'We agree about everything. It sounds as though you're good value for money.' He smiled as he said it, but the words were serious.

'My God, you are a bastard.' She pulled him to her. He was surprised, and disconcerted, by the ardency of her embrace.

Three months later Paula Mountford became Mrs George Bernard Shaw.

For years the arrangement had, it seemed to him, worked perfectly. Paula had everything she wanted. She had chosen the house, a large modern villa out in the country with a lot of ground, and outbuildings that were converted into a stable block. She had her horses, her golden retriever. She proved to be an excellent hostess, inventive with menus, skilful in making nervous guests feel at ease. She dressed individually and with flair, and he never said a word about bills. As for sex that rather lapsed, as he felt by mutual consent. He no longer felt much need for it, and the exercise of power in the firm was something that he found much more exciting. The firm prospered, his home life prospered. He was a contented man.

Until the day when he learned that Paula had a lover.

He learned it in the simplest way. He had mislaid his cigarette lighter, looked in an old bag of hers in the hope of finding one, and there was the letter. He was an incurious man, and would not have read it except that the word 'Darling' caught his eye. The words on the page seemed to him hardly credible. Could it be Paula to whom these phrases were addressed, embarrassing and ridiculous phrases of a kind that he would never have been able to bring himself to put down on paper? Paula was up in London, and it was typical of him that his first action after making the discovery was to go on looking for a light, and then to smoke his cigarette before reading the letter again.

He congratulated himself on this calmness, but it was succeeded by a wave of anger such as he had never

known. The anger had no outward manifestation, he did not break any of Paula's possessions or cut up her clothes, but the emotion shook him as he had not been shaken since he was eleven years old. He had been told then by his father that his mother had left the house forever, and gone to live with another man. He had felt that as a personal betrayal, a possession he had lost, and now he felt the same thing. Paula belonged to him, he had given her everything she ever asked for, and she had now deliberately betrayed him. She must be punished.

He made a copy of the letter, and returned it to the bag. It was, again, typical of him that he did not consider asking the name of her lover, or whether the affair was over. Such questions might lead to argument, and he only argued from a position of assured superiority. Should he employ a private detective? He decided against this, partly because it was Paula's betrayal that concerned him and not the name of her past or present lover, but principally for the reason that to consult a private detective involved putting himself to some extent in the man's power, and to put himself in somebody else's power was something that he had never done in his life. Instead he watched Paula himself, following her by car on the days when she said that she would be going out. He did not use his own car, which she might have recognised, but rented one. In less than a week he had discovered the identity of her lover. He was a man of Paula's own age, divorced from his wife, a well-to-do gentleman farmer who was a member of the hunt she rode with. The man lived a few miles away, and she went to his house one or two afternoons a week.

But GBS was little interested in the man, and did not blame him. He appreciated that to sleep with another man's wife was a kind of triumph, one he had savoured himself in his bachelor days, when the chief pleasure had been talking afterwards to the unwitting cuckold. It was

Paula who must be punished, but it was easier to say this than to discover the means. He did not threaten divorce, because he feared that this would be no punishment, and also it would mean that she was no longer in his possession. What else could he do that would make her miserable as she deserved to be miserable, take away forever that look of a cat almost choked with cream that he now saw on her face? He thought about it for days while the anger grew within him, grew satisfyingly because he knew that it would find an outlet. Eventually he decided that the only possible punishment was death.

It was necessary to assure himself that the punishment was just, and this was not difficult. Look at the matter logically, and it was apparent that he and Paula had an agreement. She had broken it, and no longer gave value for the money she received. It was true, and he acknowledged it, that the idea of her suffering pleased him, as he had been pleased by the lasting nature of the injuries sustained by that trade union branch secretary. He considered, and reluctantly rejected, the idea that Paula's horse face might be permanently scarred. What would happen afterwards? He could hardly divorce her without incurring blame, and he had no wish to spend the rest of his life with a disfigured woman.

He was aware that the logic he used was that of a superior man (in a phrase, the logic of GBS), and that it would not be generally understood. In the event of Paula's death he would be an obvious suspect, and he had no intention of standing in a dock, or even suffering arrest. It was essential therefore that he should not have any apparent connection with what happened. He would work through intermediaries, but none of them must see him, or be able to make a connection leading back to him. It was a difficult problem, but one of an intellectual kind, resembling a problem in chess. He played chess well, and

in a day or two he had solved the problem.

The first person to see was Jerry Wilde. Jerry owed him a debt, but he would not rely on that. The logical man does not depend on emotion.

The debts Jerry owed him, for they were counted in the plural, went back to their days at grammar school. GBS had always been, like his namesake, long and wiry, physically capable of looking after himself. Jerry Wilde was the kind of perky little shrimp who was a natural target for bullying. It had been amusing to defend him, and to show his contempt for the rest of the school by making it clear that he would sooner talk to Jerry than to the captain of cricket. Jerry's worshipful attitude, his readiness to run errands and in general to do what he was told, were also agreeable. He was a lively little boy, an excellent mimic, good especially at catching the tones of other boys, and a great success in the school plays. But there was a basic dishonesty about Jerry. He would cheat in exams even though he knew the answers, and GBS had once saved him from the threat of expulsion for stealing, by pretending to find the missing money, which he had provided out of his own pocket.

Jerry's later career was much what might have been predicted. He got jobs but couldn't hold them. He went on benders and failed to turn up for work, fiddled accounts when he had anything to do with money, was always ready to help in handling TV sets, cases of whisky, or other quickly saleable things without asking where they came from. GBS had saved him from an embezzlement charge by paying his employer something over the amount Jerry had taken, and from something more serious when Jerry, blind drunk at the wheel of a car, had mounted the pavement and knocked down an old age pensioner. She had been persuaded to take money instead of pressing charges. Why did he bother with Jerry? Well,

on both those occasions he had made Jerry sign a statement admitting the facts. And then Jerry seemed to know or be able to get the dirt on everybody, and GBS had made use of this knowledge. It was Jerry who had found the boys who turned the trick with the vans and those who tamed the trade unionists, who told them what to do and paid them off, so that GBS never even knew who they were. Jerry was useful.

At the moment he was working for a man who cannibalised cars, put bits and pieces into other cars that had been in accidents and sold for scrap. Then he sprayed them, changed the speedo and plates, and sold them as salesman's models.

'Looking for a car, boss? Give you a good trade in on the one you've got.' Jerry had always been a grinner. Above the grin his nose was bright red with alcohol, his cheeks hardly less so.

'I wanted a chat.'

'Round at the King's Head?' GBS shook his head, made a gesture towards his car. 'Like that, is it? Mind the shop Bill, shan't be long.' Bill, at the back of the showroom, waved a hand. They drove a couple of miles, then GBS pulled into a lay-by.

'You're going to land in trouble with those cars,' he said. 'The registration plate on that Jaguar, where did it come from?'

'Couldn't tell you off-hand.'

'And what about the registration book?'

'Looks beautiful. Don't ask where I got it, not unless you're a buyer.'

'You won't get away with it for long.'

'And when there's trouble who shall I run to? Don't tell me. Did we come out here for you to say that, or just to look at the traffic?'

'Neither. I need a little help.'

Jerry cocked his head to one side, bird-like. 'Yours to command.'

'It's a little bit like the Layton business.' Layton had sustained the hip injury.

'And you want me to find a couple of boys, fix it with them?'

'Not exactly. I want somebody reliable, very reliable. You find him, give me a number where I can call him. You don't, not on any account, mention my name. That's it.'

'That's it?' Jerry's bright bird eye showed surprise. 'You'll handle it yourself? Why and wherefore?'

'Not your business. You just give me a name and number.'

'The boss orders, it shall be done.' He sketched a salute. 'A bit ticklish though. The sort of boy I know, he knows me. But he *don't* know you, if you get my meaning. If I knew the strength of what you wanted, that would help.'

'No. It's better to stick to what I said.'

'That means it must be strong.'

He affected irritation. 'If you don't want to help, say so. There'd be fifty pounds in it for you, just for a name and number.'

'When have I ever said no? It's ticklish, that's all. I might have to put you on to somebody who'd pass you on, get me? Leave it with me for a day or two, I'll ask around. Discreetly mind, don't worry. That's it?'

'That's it.'

'Then let's get back.' When they were back at the showroom Jerry stuck his head through the car window. His breath smelt of beer and pickled onions. 'About the fifty, GBS, forget it. This one's on the house.'

Two days later he rang back with a name and number. 'Like I said, it's someone who'll make the arrangements. Can't say more, he'll tell you the rest himself. Say you're a friend of mine when you call. Ring at five o'clock any

afternoon, he'll be there. And, boss?

'Yes?'

'Be careful. They're wide awake, some of these boys.'

The thought of the dangerous element involved made his blood tingle, his heart beat pleurably faster. The danger of involvement was part of the game, its avoidance a mark of the logician's skill. Had Jerry understood that? In any case his part was now finished, and he could say nothing damaging.

He rang the number from a public call box just after five o'clock. The voice that came on was low, cautious.

'Is that Mr Middleton, Jack Middleton?'

'Yes.'

'Jerry Wilde gave me your name, said I could call you.'

'Jerry, right.'

'He thought you might be able to help me with a problem.'

'What sort of problem?'

'A friend of mine needs a job done.'

Now the voice rose a little, roughened, a voice definitely not out of the top drawer.

'I don't know what you're talking about. Who are you, what's your name?'

'My friend wants me to remain private.'

'Is that so? You just tell him my name's Jack Middleton and I like to know who I'm dealing with. Got it?'

'Yes. Don't hang up, Mr Middleton. We're talking about a big job, a lot of money.'

Silence. 'How much is a lot? And what's it for?'

'My friend wants —' He found, quite unexpectedly, that he could not form the words. He was strongly conscious of the interior of the telephone box. On one wall somebody had written *Tony loves Lucy* and on another *United Rule OK?*

The harsh voice said, 'What's up? Want somebody hit,

is that it?’

‘Hit, did that mean killed? He was not sure. ‘Disposed of.’ The words came out choked, as if he was being strangled.

‘Say it how you like. Ten grand.’

‘*How* much?’

‘Ten grand. That covers it, my commission included.’

He was so astonished that he was briefly silent. He wanted to expostulate, to say that the jobs done before had cost no more than a few hundred, but very likely Middleton knew nothing about them. When he found his voice he said, ‘That’s much more than my friend expected. It’s too much.’

‘Please yourself. That’s the price.’

‘I must – must consult. I take it nothing would be payable until –’

‘Half in advance, other half when it’s done.’

‘But that would be trusting you with five thousand pounds.’

‘Who’s trusting who, mister?’ the coarse voice asked. ‘I don’t even know your bloody name.’

He left the box a little shaken. He was so used to being in a position of mastery, to dealing with everybody as he had dealt with Roberts, that to be almost in the position of a supplicant was disconcerting. Perhaps he should give up the whole thing, tell Paula that he knew of her affair and threaten to cut off her allowance and stop her charge accounts? But supposing she ignored him, supposing she went off to live with her gentleman farmer and made him a laughing stock? Even the possibility was not to be contemplated.

That weekend they gave a dinner party. The food was delicious, Paula as usual an admirable hostess, but he felt half a dozen times during the evening that she was mocking him. When the guests had gone he felt such a

wave of fury that he could have strangled her, or shot her with the old Webley that he had inherited from his father, who had fancied himself as a shot and had set up a target in the back garden. In fact the revolver was in his desk drawer and they were talking in the bedroom, so that the question of such a spontaneous action did not arise. In any event it would of course have been stupid, illogical, unworthy of GBS. But that evening made him decide to go ahead. On Monday evening he rang Middleton again, calling as he had been told to do at five o'clock.

'I've talked to my friend. He'd like to go ahead. On the lines you mentioned.'

'What's his name? Your *friend*, I mean.'

'No names. That's a condition.'

'All right.' There was an unexpected chuckle. 'But there's one name you gotta give me, what you might call the subject.' GBS gave Paula's name, and their address. 'You never said it was a woman.'

He replied with a touch of his usual acerbity. 'Before we were just talking. Now it's serious, and there things I want to know. Is your agent reliable? Does it make any difference to him that it's a woman?'

'Makes no odds to him, it's just a job. He was one of those what you call 'em, mercenaries, out in Angola, freelance now. You can talk to him yourself, make up your own mind.'

'I don't want to meet him.'

'You don't have to. I said talk, not meet. I'll give you a number to ring, ask for Charlie.'

'About making payment -'

'Talk to Charlie. You fix it with him, you pay him, he gives me my cut. He knows there might be a job, so just mention me. Here's the number.' He gave it. 'Just one thing, he ain't always there. I'd call in the evening,

between six and eight. After eight he's usually out with the boys.'

'He's reliable, he wouldn't talk about it to them?'

'He's a professional.'

The first time he rang the number there was no reply. The second time a voice answered, and said it was Charlie.

'I've been put on to you by Jack Middleton. About a job I want done.'

'Jack said something, gave me the name. And you're Mr X, incognito you might call it.' The voice had a disagreeable twang to it, some accent he could not place. Was it South African? Charlie began asking practical questions. When did he want it done? As soon as possible. GBS had given some thought to the method, and said that if it could look like a car accident, that would be ideal. Charlie said a decisive no to that, as too hard to arrange. Then an attempted burglary of the house, the subject came home unexpectedly -

The voice with its odd twang interrupted. 'You've been reading too many books, Mr X. First thing I look after is Number One. It's got to be simple, probably at night, a gun with a silencer. If I can make it look like a robbery okay, but don't rely on it. Don't rely on anything, except the job being done.'

'When?'

'Give me a week after I've got the first instalment. Let's talk about that. I want used notes, ones and fives. You drop it by a rubbish bin on the London road, I pick it up, I'll give you the details.'

'No.'

For the first time the voice lost its assurance. 'What you mean, no?'

'That won't do. You could check on my car or see me. You said I'm incognito. I want to stay that way. Now, this is what I propose.'

Charlie listened, then said, 'And the other five? When the job's done?'

'The same way.'

'Fancy but clever. Think of everything, Mr X, don't you?'

'I try to.' Then they discussed the timing.

The conversation took place on Monday evening. On Wednesday afternoon GBS took the 2.30 train out of the city. It was a slow train that stopped at several places, and it was busy during the rush hours but two-thirds empty in the afternoons, so that he had no trouble in finding a carriage to himself.

When he was a boy they had lived at Thelsby, almost at the end of the line, and he had travelled hundreds of times on the train to school. A couple of miles before Thelsby there was a stretch of single-track line, and the train from the city always stopped to let one from the other direction come through. At the point where it stopped there was a grass embankment to one side, and often in that distant past he and Jerry had jumped out of the carriage, half-run and half-rolled down the grass, leapt down the steep bank at the end, and wriggled through the wire that separated the embankment from the road.

Today the train stopped as it had always done. GBS muffled his face in a scarf. There was a whistle, the train for the city passed them. He opened the carriage window. Their own train began to move, very slowly. He flung the cheap attache case as far as he could down the grass slope. He could see no sign of Charlie, who was no doubt concealed behind the steep drop at the bottom. All Charlie could have seen of him was a hand, and a face hidden behind a scarf. On the way back from Thelsby he looked out to where he had thrown the attache case, and saw only grass.

It was perfect.

He recited the perfection of it to himself all the way home. It was inevitable that after Paula's death all three people involved, Jerry, Jack and Charlie, should assume that he had ordered it. Let them think so, for they could prove nothing. And what could the police prove? If they talked to Jerry, any admission he made would be damaging to himself, and so could be ruled out. As for Jack Middleton and Charlie, what identification could they make beyond a voice on the telephone?

Of course he would be a suspect. He was prepared for long interrogations, and even looked forward to them because he knew that he would emerge triumphant. No doubt the police would discover the gentleman farmer, but this revelation would come as a total surprise to GBS. (How wise he had been not to use a private detective.) And the police would look in vain for any discrepancies in his bank account, or any large withdrawals, for the money had come from the Emergency Fund. Would he pay the rest of the money after the job was done? He kept an open mind about it, feeling that it must be possible to make some deal with Charlie.

It was a logical operation, and in such an operation every possibility is taken into account, so that the unexpected cannot occur. He had only to sit back and await the result.

Thursday passed, and Friday. He drove into the works as usual, chaired editorial discussions, had talks with a consortium that was talking about making an offer for two of his weeklies. While he went about these occupations he waited for the telephone call, or for the policeman who would begin: 'I'm sorry to say, Mr Shaw, that...'. On Friday afternoon, he knew, Paula saw her farmer. Perhaps while she was driving home... or when she returned to the house...?

But when he returned on Friday he was greeted by the

smell of boeuf bourguignon and found Paula in the kitchen, making a first course of avocado and prawns. She had the *sleek* look she always wore after a session with her lover, a look that dissipated any possible feeling of regret. On Saturday Paula went out with the hunt, on Sunday morning the papers were late and she drove down to the village to get them. Each time he wound himself up into a state of expectation, but nothing happened. On Sunday evening he was unable to sit still to watch TV, made an excuse and went to his study, where he sat at his desk staring out into the dark night. When he returned she was watching a gangster series.

On Monday morning she said that she was going to London. Whether she did so, or saw her farmer, she was at home in the evening.

On Tuesday nothing happened.

Give me a week after I've got the first instalment. On Wednesday afternoon the week was up. And on that evening Paula came home in the best of spirits after, as she said, an afternoon spent with a couple of girl friends. They were giving a dinner party on Friday, and she had done some shopping for it.

On Thursday morning he left home as usual, went to a call box and rang Charlie's number. No reply. He drove in to the works, dealt with correspondence, went out twice to call boxes. The number rang, but there was no answer. Ring between six and eight in the evening, Jack Middleton had said. He rang at six with no result, and then called the exchange to ask if the line was in working order. In less than a minute the operator came back to him.

'That number is a public call box.'

'*What?* It isn't possible. There must be a mistake.'

'I will repeat the number,' the operator said, and did so. 'Is that correct? Very good. That is the number of a public call box.'

He asked where it was, and was given the name of a street in the east end of the city. He drove down there, looked at the red glass-windowed box, even went into it as though there might be an answer to his questions within. In some way or other he had been cheated, either by Charlie or by Jack Middleton. He did not ring Middleton, but went to see Jerry Wilde.

Jerry was in the King's Head, drinking what was obviously not his first or second brandy and soda. He greeted GBS with a slap on the back, and asked how things were going.

'I have to talk to you. Come out now. Right away.'

'Can't be done, boss. Got to meet a man about a car. Big deal. Be here any minute. Then taking him out for a drive, back here, have a couple of drinks, argue the toss about the price -'

It might just have been possible to talk sense to Jerry now, but in an hour or two it would be useless to try.

'Come and see me tomorrow.'

'Anything you say. When and where?'

On Friday there was a meeting at the office which was likely to take all day. He told Jerry to come to the house at six o'clock. He would be gone long before seven thirty, when the dinner party guests arrived.

'Unexpected honour, boss. I'll be there.' It was true that Jerry was not the kind of person he asked home, and that Paula did not care for him, but the circumstances were exceptional.

On Friday, punctually at six, Jerry drove up in a Jaguar, no doubt the one with the fake registration book. He wore a hat with a little feather in it, and a check suit. Paula was passing through the hall on the way to the kitchen when he arrived, and greeted him coolly. After that they went to the study. GBS sat behind his desk and told Jerry what had happened. At the end he said, 'I want an explanation.'

Jerry wriggled. 'You know what you sound like? Old Porson, our old head. *I want an explanation, Wilde.* And I knew I'd never be able to explain, not to his satisfaction. You wouldn't have a drink handy?'

'After the explanation.'

'I only put you in touch with Jack Middleton. Have you tried ringing him?'

'No. It was Charlie who arranged to take the money.'

'Trouble is I don't know Charlie, do I? Why not try Jack, see what he's got to say? Here, I'll dial the number for you, I know it.' He did so, and held up the receiver so that GBS could hear the ringing tone. Then he dialled again.

'What are you doing?'

'Just checking. Operator, will you run a check on one-eight-three-four-six. I've been dialling, and can't get a reply. What's that, what do you say? Well I never. Many thanks.' He put down the telephone, grinned. 'Would you believe it, that's a public call box.'

'But that isn't possible. You put me in touch with Middleton.'

'That's right.'

'You must know him.'

'Right again, boss, I know him.' Out of Jerry Wilde's grinning face came the rough voice. '*You just tell him my name's Jack Middleton.* I know Charlie too.' And GBS heard again that disagreeable twang. '*You've been reading too many stories, Mr X. The first thing I look after is Number One.* I was always able to manage voices, remember?'

Even now he could not believe it. 'The attache case. It was you who collected it.'

'Nobody else. I thought it was a nice touch, dropping it where we used to scramble down as kids. Sentimental. Nearly piped my eye.'

'You've robbed me, stolen five thousand pounds.'

Jerry's grin became a laugh. 'I don't see it that way. I

reckon you owe it me.'

'But I've always helped you. I kept you out of prison.'

'And made me sign statements so that you could hold 'em over me. Only you can't use 'em now, can you, or you'd have to say why you hung on to them so long. Did you think I liked being an errand boy? Anyway, the answer's no. So when you were so mysterious I thought, well, let's see just what he's got in mind, shall we. And my word, wasn't it naughty?' Jerry wiped his red face with a handkerchief, and went on.

'I wouldn't try again to do something naughty about your wife, because I might have something interesting to tell the fuzz. And you can't do anything about the five thousand, can you, *boss*? I'm taking a holiday for a few weeks, can't make up my mind whether it's Madeira or the West Indies, but before I went I wanted to see your face when I told you. Incidentally, I bet you meant to cheat poor old Charlie out of his second five grand. Do you know where I'd say you are, *boss*? Up the creek without a paddle.'

Before this speech was half-way through, George Bernard Shaw had ceased to be a logical and reasonable man, and had become a machine filled with nothing but hatred for the creature opposite him. He acted not reasonably, but from this uncontrollable hatred when he opened the right hand drawer of the desk, took out the revolver, and shot Jerry Wilde neatly between the eyes.

George Bernard Shaw went to Broadmoor. There he became the chess champion, and every month composed a chess problem which he sent to the world champion, challenging him to solve it. From the fact that he never received any reply to these communications he made the logical deduction that the champion was unable to solve the problems, and by the extension of this logic that George Bernard Shaw was the best chess player in the world.