Chapter One

THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY

A Glasgow-to-London mail train was stopped and robbed in Buckinghamshire early today. It happened at Cheddington, near Tring, at about 3 a.m. The driver and fireman were attacked and injured; and two coaches of the train were detached. They contained mail of all kinds, including registered post. A police spokesman said a short time ago that it’s believed a large number of men took part and that they got away with a considerable amount. Neither the driver nor fireman was badly hurt. Every senior officer of the Buckinghamshire police force has gone to the scene of the robbery.

Transcript of the first BBC news broadcast at 8 and 9 a.m. on Thursday, 8 August 1963

It was just after 3 a.m. on the morning of Thursday 8 August 1963 when the walkie-talkie came to life. It was Bruce Reynolds: the train had passed through Leighton Buzzard and was now less than a mile away. After a wait of nearly one-and-a-half hours by the side of the main line between Glasgow and London the moment had come – a moment that would come to be known as the Great Train Robbery.

Sixteen of us were scattered about the embankment that night, four of whom were never to be caught.

A good few stories have been told since about the robbery and what happened that night. Stories that have included everything from a German SS connection to a Mr. Big linked to the government of the day. I have even read in the Brazilian press that I shot the driver in the head at point-blank range, and I am still often accused of having coshed the driver, despite not even being on the train at the time.
The true facts, as always, are somewhat different.

The train robbery was the work of two different London gangs who came together for the ‘Big One’. I was a member of neither gang, yet after everything I have read and heard since it is often difficult to believe that it was my friendship with one man, Bruce Reynolds, and the work I had done as a legitimate builder for a retired train driver, that brought me to be lying on a grass embankment in Buckinghamshire that August night. I was the odd man out.

My journey to the embankment can probably be traced back to 1949 and my first spell in Lewes Prison at the age of 19 as a YP (Young Prisoner). It was during this first time in Lewes - I went there twice - that I met a young ex-Post Office sorter by the name of Albert Kitson.

Kit, as we called him, was serving an eighteen-month sentence for taking part in the robbery of the Post Office where he had been working. He had made a wax impression of the key to the safe where the cash was held and passed it on to an old pro.

Kit and I used to walk together during exercise periods, and more than once he made reference to ‘large sums of money’ that were transported by British Rail.

‘If a group of really game lads got together,’ he said, ‘they could pull off the tickle of a lifetime.’

The following year I met Bruce Reynolds in Wormwood Scrubs Prison. I was back inside again with a three-month sentence for ‘taking and driving away a motor vehicle without the owner’s consent.’ From the start it was clear that Bruce was a cut above the other cons. We became good friends over time and discovered a mutual interest in music, literature and breaking the law. I told him what Kit had told me about the large sums of cash being transported by rail. It was a piece of information he was never to forget.

Our paths crossed several times during the ensuing years - in and out of prison - but we never got up to any villainy together prior to the train robbery itself.

It was after a rather longer stretch in Lewes Prison, four years for burglary, that I concluded that it was time to have a go at honest employment and I found work as a carpenter. I had learned the basics of
the trade in prison and the work really interested me. When I came out of jail on that occasion I went to live with a pretty tough lady in Merstham, Surrey. Her name was Ivy and she was a very good friend of Bruce’s. She was quite fearless and wouldn’t shy away from a punch-up if she found herself facing one. But Ivy was a good sort and if you were a friend of Bruce then you were a friend of Ivy’s. She had little, if any, time for Old Bill and could always be depended upon to sell a bit of bent gear or to take care of the odd box of gelignite.

Bruce would visit us from time to time, usually arriving in a ritzy sports car of some kind and always impeccably dressed. He was moving up in the world of villainy and was beginning to build a reputation as the ‘Prince of Thieves’.

In the late fifties a train was held up on the London-to-Brighton line – about a mile from where I was living at the time. The signals had been tampered with and the train had stopped at a quiet spot close to a bridge which spanned the road from Merstham to Redhill. The thieves got away with precious little, but it was believed to be ‘the work of professionals’, according to a police report at the time.

In late 1957 I changed jobs leaving a muddy building site in Redhill for the cleaner work of erecting partitions in offices, mostly in and around central London. The job entailed travelling to London by train and it was on one of these journeys that I first saw Charmian Powell, the future Mrs Biggs, then sweet seventeen. We were mutually attracted and in less time than it takes to say ‘rabbit’ we were making mad, passionate love in hotels, empty train carriages and on the floor of the classrooms of the school where Charmian’s father was headmaster. It didn’t take Ivy long to discover my ‘little piece on the side’ and I was promptly given colourful marching orders.

In a romantic moment Charmian and I decided to elope, but like most young lovers we were hard up. Then, with just a little persuasion from me, Charm dipped her hand into the cash-box where she was working and filched £200 (now about £3500). And just before Christmas 1957 off we went ‘a la Bonnie and Clyde minus the firearms, with my good friend Michael Haynes, a man who was going to play such an important role in my life, at
the wheel of a hired Vauxhall Victor. We headed west from London as I had a fancy to see Devon and Cornwall again. I had been evacuated to Coombe-in-Tegnhead in Devon at the beginning of the war and later, as the bombing got worse, to Delabole in Cornwall. There was a slate quarry close to Delabole and I remembered how easy it had been to get into a shed where the explosives were stored. What I planned to do with explosives I can’t remember, but it was all rather academic, as long before we got to Cornwall the money had run out. So Mike and I decided to try a break-in or two with Charm acting as lookout.

Sadly, one snowy evening after a hair-raising chase through the tortuous roads of Swanage, our luck ran out and we were nicked. A string of charges followed, including my usual: ‘taking and driving away a motor vehicle without the owner’s consent.’

Charm got her first - and only - taste of porridge in the women’s wing of HMP Exeter and was soon up before the governor for smuggling in cash which was strictly against prison regulations. Mike and I fared better. We were sent to HMP Dorchester where, as we were more experienced, our money wasn’t found!

On the 1 April 1958 – an April Fools Day Charmian was never to forget - we appeared before the judge at the Dorset Quarter Sessions. A love-story was presented to the court by our learned counsel, but the prosecutor declared us ‘a threat’. Our fate was now in the hands of the red-faced judge. The court adjourned. Everything, I was told by my brief, was going to depend on whether his lordship’s lunch had been satisfactory or not.

Stifling a burp, the well-fed judge returned to pass sentence. Charmian and Mike were put on two years’ probation, while I ended up with two and a half years in prison - not a bad result, considering. With remission I was looking at twenty months so Charmian and Mike would still be on probation when I got out.

And that’s the way it turned out. I was sent to Norwich to do my time, but regularly, once a month, Charmian came to visit. We sat holding hands and making plans for our future. We were going to get married and ‘settle down’. We exchanged long and passionate letters. I thought my sentence would never end.
At the time I could not have foreseen that I would be returning to Norwich nearly 50 years later for what is hopefully my last spell inside. I was pleased to see in July 2007 that the roof I had helped to build in 1958 was still standing and in good nick. Thanks to ‘health & safety’ prisoners are never likely to be invited to build the roof over their own heads again!

I was finally released on a cold, foggy morning in mid-December 1959. I had been transferred to Wandsworth Prison in London to finish my time and Charmian was waiting outside the gate to meet me. We made a beeline for our favourite hotel and booked in as Mr and Mrs Biggs. Champagne and a double serving of bacon and eggs were sent to the room.

It was late evening when we emerged and caught the train to Redhill. I had arranged to stay with friends, John and Violet Goldsmith, until I could find a place of my own. It was good to see old friends again and we sat around drinking tea and laughing about old times. Charmian could not stay long as she was anxious not to infringe the terms of her probation. She didn’t want ‘Old Saddle-Bags’ – Miss Sadler, her probation officer – to read her the riot act.

I got a job with the Reigate Borough Council working as a carpenter. Not very well paid, but plenty of tea and sympathy from the housewives. From my wages I managed to rent a small furnished flat on Elm Road where Charm and I spent as much time as possible together. We were more keen than ever to get married but Charmian's father, far less fond of me since having to fork out the £200 his daughter had pilfered as well as her legal fees, was dead against the idea of our union. In the end we decided to force the old man's hand. We would get Charm pregnant and present our case as fait accompli.

The wedding took place at the Reigate Registry Office on 20 February 1960. For us it was the Wedding Of the Year.

I changed my job shortly afterwards and started working for an elderly Redhill building contractor by the name of Sid Budgeon. Sid allowed me to get in as much overtime as possible as soon there would be a third Biggs to feed.

Nicholas Grant was born on 23 July 1960 at Redhill County Hospital. The proud and happy parents could be seen wheeling His Nibs through
the streets of Redhill in an enormous plum-coloured baby carriage. The pram had cost an arm and a leg but ‘Mother’ had insisted that it had to be the very best.

I was happy with the way things were going. I was being offered so much work that I decided it was time to set up in business for myself, hiring help whenever necessary. We also moved into larger premises at 37 Alpine Road.

When Nicky was nearly one year old, our close friends Ron and Janet Searle invited Charm and I to spend a week with them in a caravan in Hastings. Although I couldn’t really afford to take the time off I finally allowed myself to be persuaded to go. Janet was most enthusiastic about fortune telling and things of that nature, things that I considered at the time to be nothing more than mumbo jumbo.

We drove to Hastings in the Searles’ car and for much of the time Janet was raving on about her pet subject, trying to persuade us all to have our fortunes told.

The second day in Hastings Charmian did go and see a fortune-teller on the pier. A certain ‘Professor Cullen’ was her seer. When she rejoined us some twenty minutes later she was visibly shaken. The professor had told her things that she thought only she and her mother knew.

‘It really was remarkable,’ she said.

Janet looked triumphant.

‘You see,’ she gloated. ‘Now it’s your turn, Ron.’ I declined her invitation, insisting that it was still all hocus-pocus. The next morning, however, when everyone was asleep I went into town and found myself a fortune-teller. Ten shillings she charged for her services. Half a quid! It was daylight robbery, I thought.

The fortune-teller was a frail-looking old lady of seventy odd. She invited me to put my hands on her crystal ball and told me straight away that in later years I would suffer with ‘kidney problems’. This, it turned out, had nothing to do with fortune telling – she deduced it from my sweating palms. She then went on to tell me that I was a self-employed carpenter and that when I had worked for other people I had always had ‘foreman trouble’. She said that I was on holiday in Hastings but could ill-afford to
take the time off because of pressing work commitments. I was with a wife - nine to ten years younger than myself - and had an only son who was just one year old. She saw me forming a partnership with a man who worked with ‘bricks and mortar’ (at that time I knew of no bricklayer that I would take on as a partner).

Until that point everything she had said had been totally correct. How, I wanted to know, out of all the trades and professions that exist could she know that I was a carpenter - and a self-employed one at that? Her credibility took a tumble, however, when she told me that I would ‘travel extensively around the world and that I would have a child with a woman with long, black hair.’ Now, I thought, we were really in the realms of gypsy flim-flam. But I was impressed. She told me I would never be rich but I would always be a good ‘breadwinner’. Then, as I was leaving, she called me back.

‘I have some advice for you,’ she offered. ‘If you want anything out of this life be sure you pay for it.’

A year passed and one day over lunch Charm told me that she had run into an old school chum, Janet, who had moved into the neighbourhood with her husband, Ray Stripp. They would be coming along on Saturday evening for drinks. Ray was a bricklayer and Charm had told her friend that I might be able to fix him up with some weekend work. As history shows we became partners, splitting the expenses and profits down the middle. We went from strength to strength taking on more workers until we had a gang of ten. On paper we were making a substantial profit, but some of our clients were slow to pay and there were times when I found it difficult to meet my half of the payroll.

Christopher Dean, our second son, was born on 24 March 1963. A little beauty - and the image of his dad. Christopher brought with him additional expenses and one weekend in June I found myself particularly strapped for cash. I decided to phone my old pal Bruce Reynolds and see if he could lend me £500 - that would be about £8500 today - to tide me over until better times.

‘Normally, as you know, I would be only too happy to help you out,’ Bruce said when I called him. ‘But at this exact moment all my dough is
tied up in a piece of business, something that I would like to talk to you about, only not over the phone.’

We made an arrangement for him to visit us at the weekend. He arrived at 37 Alpine Road in Redhill with his wife Frances and his baby son, by coincidence also called Nicholas. While the girls were in the garden cooing over the kids, Bruce said that he was in a position to put me into his ‘piece of business’, details of which he could not give me right then. I thanked him for the offer but pointed out that I was now working for a living and was very happy with married life. I also wasn’t keen to put my liberty at risk.

‘I’m pleased to hear it,’ Bruce said, ‘but if you want to make one I can guarantee you a minimum of forty grand for your whack.’

‘Jesus!’ I replied. ‘Can I have some time to think it over?’

‘You can, but there’s one condition. If you want to take part you will have to come up with someone who knows how to drive a diesel train.’

As luck or fate would have it, I was working for an elderly train-driver. I was renewing the front windows of his house in Redhill.

I found it hard to sleep that night. Forty grand was a lot of money to even dream about. It was enough money to buy four new four-bedroomed houses in the best part of Reigate. I phoned Bruce early the next morning and put my name on the list.

‘I’m in,’ I said. I gave him the train-driver’s address and told Bruce that I would be working there for at least another week.

A few days later Bruce drove down from London with his brother-in-law, John Daly. They wanted to get a close look at the old man. The train driver - let’s call him simply Peter, although I believe he has to be dead by now - saw Bruce and John pull up in Bruce’s sporty Lotus. We went off to a nearby pub to discuss a plan of action.

My first priority was to see if the old boy would join the gang. All he would have to do was to drive a diesel train for a mile or so for a straight £40,000 (nearly £665,000 at today’s rates). When I returned to the house Peter was watering his garden - his pride and joy.

‘What would you do for £40,000?’ I asked casually.

‘£40,000?’ he repeated. ‘Blimey, I’d do just about anything for that kind of money although I wouldn’t hurt or kill anyone for it. Why are you asking?’
‘Would you rob a bank?’

‘Yes I would,’ he affirmed after a moments thought. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Suppose I was to offer you £40,000 for your share, would you join me in a robbery?’

‘I would. If you want me to help you with anything like that I’d be in like a shot.’

‘But what if you were to get caught?’

‘I’d keep my mouth shut, if that’s what you mean, and if I got time I would tread it out. But what is this all about? Are you really thinking of robbing a bank, Ron?’

‘I can’t tell you anything yet. But if I ask you to join me, you will?’

Peter put his hand out and we shook on it. His interest in his roses had wilted somewhat. He kept asking questions - most of which I honestly could not answer - and he wanted to know if it had anything to do with the people he had recently seen in the white Lotus.

The first time I met the whole gang was in Roy James’ flat in Nell Gwynn House in Chelsea. I have to say they looked a pretty formidable bunch. With a few exceptions they were all big men and even though they were well dressed the majority still had the distinctive look of villains.

The basic plan for the robbery had already been well established when I entered the scene. Jimmy White was the ‘quartermaster’ responsible for the provision of army uniforms and overalls to be used in the raid. Charlie Wilson was chosen to stock the hideout with food and drink. Roy James and the man I will call Mr One, a member of the gang who would never be caught, would take care of transport. And so forth.

Bruce formally introduced me to the gang and I was invited to tell the assembly what I could about the train driver. They asked questions about him. What kind of trains was he working on? How well would he hold up if he got nicked? No stone was left unturned.

Most decisions taken by the gang were made on a show of hands and a vote was called for as to whether the old man should be brought in or not. All hands were raised with the exception of one, Roy James. The gang listened intently as Roy argued that the old man had no experience in the world of villainy.
‘It’s all very well for the old chap to say that he would keep his mouth shut,’ Roy went on, ‘but he had never been trampled on by a fifteen stone copper.’

It was a strong argument and I knew from experience how ugly Old Bill could get during an ‘interrogation’. But where would we stand, countered one of the gang, if the actual train-driver refused to cooperate? We had to have a back up driver, it was that simple. On a second show of hands yours truly and the old man were voted in.

Now that I had been formally accepted, Bruce filled me in on the details of the plan and when the robbery would take place. I would have to take Peter to Euston Station and let him see the kind of train that he would be expected to handle.

‘He’s got to be sure that he knows how to drive this particular train,’ Bruce emphasized.

A couple of days later Peter and I went to Euston Station. I bought a platform ticket and sat on a bench at the far end of the platform close to the sleek diesel engine of a train preparing to leave. I hid behind a copy of the Daily Mirror. After a minute or two Peter came along dressed in his railwayman’s blue dungarees, an oily rag hanging from his jacket pocket. He gave the driver of the train a cheery greeting.

‘What-ho, mate. I’m going on one of these big buggers next week - I wonder if you’d like to give me a few tips?’

‘Sure,’ replied the driver, clearly only too happy to help one of his colleagues, ‘hop up.’ Twenty minutes later I ‘bumped into’ Peter in a café near the station. He was confident and clearly enjoying the part.

‘It’s a piece of cake,’ he said. ‘There is almost no difference to the engines I am working on in Redhill.’

It was all arranged. Bruce would meet Peter and me at Victoria Station at 8 a.m. on Tuesday 6 August. So that we could get away from our homes for what might be as much as two weeks I concocted a story that I had been contracted for a tree felling job ‘somewhere in Wiltshire’. Peter was ‘invited’ to go with me as a cook and applied for two weeks’ leave of absence from his job. Charmian was disappointed that I was going to be away from home for my thirty-fourth birthday, which fell on 8 August, but I convinced her with
the argument that I was going to be well paid for my labours and that we could celebrate in style upon my return.

Monday 5 August was a bank holiday. I had promised to take Charmian and the children to Brighton for the day. Early that morning my partner, Ray, appeared at the house with a £50 cheque for some work we had done in a nearby house. He was to give me half the value of the cheque but only had £15 in cash. Before he arrived I had been studying the form and looking over the many runners and riders scheduled for the races that day. Ray lived above the Inkpen, a betting shop, and on the spur of the moment I decided to make a bet with the £10 he owed me. I wrote down the bet on a piece of paper. It was to be a £5 each-way double: Dameon and Rococco. Two horses at different meetings. Ray thought I was mad to be gambling such an amount (about £170 at today’s values), especially on two horses that appeared on paper to have little or no chance. I said nothing to Charm, either, as she had no faith whatsoever in my gambling ‘hunches’.

We travelled to Brighton by train and had what appeared to be a happy family day. The fact that I was going off on ‘the business’ the following day was very much on my mind and I wanted to enjoy ourselves to the full. It just could be our last day together as a family for quite a long time. I tried to push these negative thoughts from my mind - I should be coming back from my trip with forty grand!

I took Nicky for a ride in a speedboat, followed by ice-cream, toffee-apples and the inevitable flop in a deck-chair on the pier.

There was horseracing in Brighton that afternoon and after looking over the runners and riders in the midday newspaper my ‘special selection’ was the favourite in the last race with Ron Hutchinson up. I tried to get Charm interested in a ten quid ‘investment’ but we settled for a fiver. I went off to place the bet. After a dinner of fish and chips I bought the late evening paper to see if the nag had obliged; it had, and there was eight pounds to collect.

Standing in line at the betting-shop to collect my winnings, I found myself looking at the day’s racing results, which were chalked up on a number of blackboards. The name Rococco caught my eye. It was one of
the horses I had asked Ray to bet on and it had won at odds of 10 to 1. Then I saw Dameon, a 9 to 1 winner.

If Ray had placed the bet I had won over £600, but would get £500, or about, £8,500 at today’s values, which was the bookmaker’s limit on any one bet. I said nothing about it to Charm, but when we got home I urgently telephoned Ray to check that he had in fact placed the bet. He said he had and asked if I had won anything. I told him, and loud enough so that Charm could hear me in the kitchen, that I had indeed won and £500 to boot. I asked him to go over to the bookmaker in the morning and pick up my winnings. My partner was dumbfounded.

‘You jammy bastard,’ he said.

My devoted spouse was not in the least bit dumbfounded, but was considerably less convinced.

‘That will be the day when you win £500 on a bet. I know you and your little games. Don’t think you can fool me.’

I rose early the next morning: I had a train to catch! A light breakfast, hugs and kisses and a final reminder not to forget to write when I got there. ‘And behave yourself,’ were Charmian’s parting words.

At Redhill station I was glad and relieved to see that Peter was among the early morning travellers to London. We had previously agreed not to travel together. At least not as a pair.

During most of the journey to Victoria I was deep in thought. I had set out to borrow £500 and I had won exactly that amount. I remembered what the old fortune teller had said: ‘If you want anything out of this life, be sure you pay for it.’ But the die was cast and there was no turning back. In truth, I knew I didn’t want to.

Bruce was waiting for us in a café in Wilton Road, next to Victoria Station. He was with his brother-in-law, John Daly, and two other members of the gang that I had met at the gathering in Roy James’ flat. They were Jimmy White, the quartermaster, and the biggest man in the group, the man who coshed the train driver; he was one of the four men never to be caught, and I’ll call him Mr Three.

After a cheese sandwich and a cup of tea we climbed into a green army Land-Rover which was parked nearby. Soon we were on the open road and
heading for Bucks. The weather was still good and the day seemed full of promise. We were generally light-hearted, laughing and joking as we went along. Peter was sitting next to me in the back of the Land Rover and appeared quite relaxed.

‘Nice vehicles, these Land Rovers,’ he said at one point. ‘Who do they belong to?’

Jimmy White, who was driving, responded: ‘Don’t know, Dad. We nicked it the night before last in the Strand.’

‘Nicked it?’ exclaimed the old man, losing his smile. ‘Christ! You can get pinched for that kind of thing!’ We all cracked up and Peter joined in, happy to be the cause of our merriment and the centre of attention.

It was mid morning by the time we arrived at our destination, Leatherslade Farm, a small farm located 300 yards off the B4011, the Thame Road, close to the villages of Brill and Oakley in Buckinghamshire. The nearest towns of note were Bicester and Thame. We were the first part of the gang to arrive; the rest would be arriving at staggered intervals. We explored the two-story farmhouse and the various outbuildings. Precious little had been left behind by the former tenants. A rusty generator seized the attention of Jimmy White who immediately set about trying to get it to work. Mr Three and I volunteered to fix a lunch of steak, chips and runner beans. Old Peter, for his part, found a deck chair and relaxed in the sun, puffing away at his pipe and blending in with the pastoral surroundings. He might as well have been in his own back yard.

During the afternoon, the second group arrived in an Austin army truck. Among the group were Tommy Wisbey, Jim Hussey, Bob Welch, Buster Edwards, Mr. One and Mr Two, two other members of the gang who were lucky enough never to be caught or even suspected. On the way to the farm the group had stopped off at a nearby town to buy further provisions. Bobby Welch, who liked a drink or two, bought a number of pipkins of ale, an act that subsequently led to his arrest and conviction. The pipkin of ale, with his fingerprints, is today a prize exhibit at Scotland Yard’s own private Crime Museum.

Roy James and Charlie Wilson arrived soon after in a second Land Rover, bringing yet more supplies. John Daly had thoughtfully brought
cards and games to while away the time and I was one of the first to start a game of Monopoly along with John, Tommy Wisbey, Charlie and Roy. Soon enough the game turned into an unruly riot with much shouting and laughter. Charlie was the runaway winner.

Peter - ‘Dad’ to the gang’ - was happy to be the tea boy, quite taken with the friendliness shown by one and all.

It was just after dark when Roger Cordrey arrived at the farm carrying a large suitcase. He was popular with the gang and received a vociferous welcome. By now there were fifteen of us at Leatherslade Farm - only Gordon Goody was missing.

At the time, Gordon was at the home of solicitor’s managing clerk, Brian Field and his German wife Karin, in Pangbourne, close to Reading. An hour’s drive from the farm. He was waiting for a phone call from a certain Post Office worker in Carlisle. Described as the ‘Ulsterman’ in the media and in various books about the robbery, this person was in league with the gang and the call that Goody was waiting for would tell him when the extra big load of registered cash had been despatched. Who the ‘Ulsterman’ is - or was - I cannot say, but when the loot was eventually split up into shares, the Ulsterman got his full whack.

Leonard ‘Nipper’ Read, who at the time of the robbery was an officer in Scotland Yard’s Murder Squad, wrote in his autobiography Nipper - The Man Who Nicked The Krays that: ‘an Irishman was responsible for planning robberies and then selling them on to the perpetrators... I am sure from all the information I had that he (the Irishman) drew up the plan for the Great Train Robbery, but it was Bruce Reynolds who honed, polished and fine-tuned it.’

We were not certain what day the big load would be sent to London after the bank holiday weekend, so we had arrived at the farm on Tuesday (6 August) just in case we had to ‘go to work’ in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

Goody arrived at Leatherslade Farm just before 11 p.m. making something of a dramatic entrance, swigging from a bottle of Johnny Walker. ‘You can all relax,’ he announced as he caught us trying on our army uniforms. ‘There’s nothing doing tonight.’ Groans greeted this piece of news. We had been raring to go.
Few of us felt like sleep that night. We sat around in the kitchen, chatting, playing cards and drinking warm beer. It was late when we finally stretched out our blankets and sleeping bags in the various rooms of the farm.

Dawn broke with the promise of another warm and sunny day. I got up and made breakfast for the early risers - eggs and bacon, of course. Rural sounds were coming through the kitchen window, a mixture of livestock and the mechanical sounds common to farms.

It had been decided on the previous day that we would show as little movement as possible. For that reason we were ‘confined to barracks’ and only allowed out to make use of the privy situated some thirty yards from the house.

During the morning that plan changed after a visitor turned up and knocked on the front door. Everyone slipped silently out of view and Bruce went to take care of the caller. It turned out to be a Mr Wyatt, a neighbouring farmer who had become accustomed to hiring a meadow which formed part of Leatherslade Farm. He wanted to know if he could make a similar arrangement with the new ‘owner’ of the farm. Bruce gave the visitor some cock and bull story about being at the farm to take care of redecorating the premises before the new owner moved in. He promised to pass on Mr Wyatt’s request.

The day seemed endless. There was little interest in cards or other pastimes and it was difficult to concentrate to even read a book. Towards late afternoon we assembled in the kitchen to go through the plan one last time to make certain that everyone knew exactly what they had to do. Subject to getting the greenlight from the Ulsterman, we would leave just after midnight and travel as an army detail on night manoeuvres. Bruce would be dressed as the officer and would be carrying ‘official papers’ to show in the unlikelihood that we were stopped by Old Bill. Bruce’s driver would be ‘Corporal’ John Daly and the rest of us (extra) ordinary soldiers. At Bridego Bridge, where the railway goes over a quiet country road just off the B488, two miles north of Cheddington Station, we would put dark blue boiler-suits on over the uniforms and go about our various tasks.

As night fell, we sat around in the dark swapping anecdotes and dirty jokes. Goody told us about an encounter he had once had with a gorgeous
chick in a swanky London restaurant. She was alone - and so was Gordon. He beckoned the waiter over and had him invite the young lady to his table. It was almost love at first sight. They wined and dined by candlelight, they danced cheek to cheek, they kissed. Gordon paid the bill.

‘You’re place or mine?’ he asked.

In the cab on the way to the young thing’s flat, Gordon started to slide his hand up under her skirt and between his companion’s legs. She stopped him. She had something to tell him: ‘I’m not a girl!’

Gordon then gave a graphic description of how he ejected, somewhat prematurely, his perfumed partner from the taxi - whilst it was still in motion. More a question of crying shame than Crying Game.

During the fun, Bruce lit up one of a number of cigars he had in his top pocket. Bobby Welch, who was sitting nearby, asked Bruce for one and Bruce obliged.

‘Give one to Pete,’ suggested Bob.

‘No, no,’ said our stand-in train driver. ‘If I had wanted one you’d give me one, wouldn’t you Bruce?’

I could almost see Bruce smiling in the gloom.

‘Don’t worry, Dad,’ he said taking a long drag at his cigar. ‘If you wanted one - I’d give you one!’

Everyone laughed, including the old man.

‘I like your friends,’ Peter confided in me. ‘They’re such a jolly crowd.’

Just before 10 p.m., Goody slipped out of the farm to phone Brian Field from the phone-box in nearby Brill. He was soon back with the news we had been waiting to hear.

‘There’s an unusually big load on the train tonight - and, gentlemen, it’s on its way.’