

## **RONNIE KRAY, GANGSTER-TWIN & KILLER-QUEEN!**

By **Chris Barber**

Ronnie Kray remains Britain's most notorious homosexual outlaw. In 1995 he died of a heart attack in Broadmoor prison hospital. Now his twin brother Reggie is due for release, having served 30 years in top security prisons. In the swinging '60's, the Krays criminal empire stretched from East to West London. It included protection rackets, international fraud, casinos, billiard halls and nightclubs. They formed links with the Mafia, fought violent gang wars, befriended star celebrities like Judy Garland, and were finally incarcerated for two gangland murders. The media sensationalised their ruthless violence. But were they really all bad?

### **BORN TO BE WILD**

Born in 1933, ten minutes apart, the Krays grew-up in Bethnal Green. It was a rough, tough and poor neighbourhood; typically East End, with cheery people in and out of each other's houses, with each other's property all day long. They rarely saw their father who was wanted by the police. Close relationships were maintained with their mother, Violet, and older brother Charlie. Some of their relatives were professional boxers - a handy trade, which the twins soon perfected. Both showed championship potential and Reg won a title. Unfortunately they developed a problem with uniformed authority, leading to regular run-ins with stroppy-bobbies. How strange, you might think, in this dull 'n' dreary, homophobic...class-ridden, over-regimented, under-nourished State! Once, young Ron enquired directions from a copper. An altercation ensued - probably because the copper couldn't spell the street name! Anyway, plod belts Ron; Ron decks plod and goes about his business. Five minutes later, Ron's picked-up by a mobile bacon unit. Reg, who had just met Ron and heard about plod, is left helpless...turns on his heels...and gives plod a bashing, which (one hopes) he never forgot! (Both Krays got a kicking in the slammer, of course... The shame of it all!)

Their indignance grew when they were called-up for National Service. On their first day some sergeant kept ranting at them. So they thumped him and walked home. After their arrest and return, they buggered off again. This happened three times, until they were confined to a cell where they continued to practice their left-hooks on any NCO's with the audacity to confront them. Finally officers forced them onto a rifle range. But the Krays caused chaos, shooting in all directions, wounding officers and claiming to be short-sighted! Victory against Her Majesty's Armed Forces was theirs - they were decommissioned.

Back in the East End, they passed the time in street brawls as their reputation grew. A local Billiard hall was being terrorised by ruffians, presenting the Break the Krays needed. The Regal in Mile End employed the twins as bouncers. Next day, it was the safest building in London. Delighted at being saved from bankruptcy, the owner gave Ron and Reg a partnership leaving them to manage things. Business was booming. Suddenly most of East London's male population wanted to work for them. So, Ron and Reg formed a firm which they called 'the Firm', and offered Firm Protection Services (Ltd.Plc.) to other dodgy establishments. But there wasn't much call for them. Then, in a flash of inspiration, they hit upon a sure-fire way to make money. Where demand was lacking, create it. Make people an offer they can't refuse!

Keep YOUR business AGGRO FREE...

FIRM SECURITY SERVICE, GUARANTEED, EXTENDED WARRENTY.

SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY OFFER...

If YOU don't take it within seven days, we'll throw-in AGGRO, FREE.

Brilliant... Customers were falling over themselves to take advantage of the offer. Precisely the sort of innovative idea that FREE market economy was built on!

## OVER the RAINBOW

Ronnie was never ashamed of being homosexual - quite something for a lad from a tough, working class neighbourhood in the 1950's. But while in the East End, he kept sexual relations brief and concentrated on business. Although straight, Reggie always supported his brother's sexual inclinations. If anyone wanted a showdown with Ron, they would have to fight both twins.

Ron, *'liked boys, preferably with long lashes and a certain melting look around the eyes. He particularly enjoyed them if they had no experience of men before. He liked teaching them and often gave them a fiver to take their girl-friends out on condition they slept with him the following night. He always asked them which they preferred ... The gifts he gave them were his main extravagance. He never seems to have forced anyone into bed against his will and, as he proudly insisted, was free from colour prejudice, having tried Scandinavians, Latins, Anglo-Saxons, Arabs, Negroes, Chinese and a Tahitian.'* **THE PROFESSION OF VIOLENCE** - John Pearson [Panther, 1973]

In 1956, Ron went to prison for beating up a rival gang member. Inside, he got involved with Frank Mitchell, known as the Mad Axe-man. Meanwhile, Reggie established The Double R in Bow Road, dedicating it to Ron. It was a new venture, the first luxurious, West-End-style club in the East End. This proved to be very popular, but the Kray's real ambitions lay in expansion into the West End.

Their chance came when they acquired a stake in Esmeralda's Barn, a Knitsbridge casino. Ron was released and moved to Chelsea. *'Ronnie fell in love ... he began living with a boy on a regular basis and permitted himself the luxury of continued tenderness for the first time in his life. ... He enjoyed taking the boy out and being seen with him in the best restaurants: the boy was beautiful and behaved like a petulant mistress. Ronnie enjoyed indulging these shows of temperament. ... One man the boy had flirted with had his face cut open. The boy was "his" boy.'*

The Society Club in Jermyn Street was Ron's favourite place, where he could show off his boyfriend to affluent society. *'With its dark panelling and its pink silk-covered lamps ... an Israeli violinist called "Gipsy" played Lehar at the tables; the champagne was expensive. ... When Gipsy came to his table, as he always did, Ronnie's eyes moistened at the music. Turning to his guests, he would point to his boy. "Beautiful, isn't he? Don't you think he's beautiful? Don't you wish he was yours?"'*

But he missed Reg, then in prison for attempted extortion. He took his boyfriend on holiday to the Canary Islands. This failed to relieve his deepening depression and they returned prematurely. Ronnie dropped him and frantically worked his way through dozens of guys. It was all to no avail; nobody could compensate for Reg.

Only after Reg was released, could Ron stop brooding. Meanwhile, Ron discovered West End society gave him access to a rich and powerful homosexual elite. He built-up a network of friends in high places, which became essential to their growing empire. They improved their public image with charity donations. Homosexual Labour MP Tom Driberg was impressed by the Krays charitable concerns and thrilled by their company. Star celebrities appeared at their sponsored charity events. Many show-biz personalities remained intimate friends of the Krays. Judy Garland was frequently photographed in their company. Following their arrest, Garland sent a telegram wishing them good luck. It prompted Ronnie's renowned remark to the judge during their trial, 'If I wasn't here now I'd probably be having a drink with Judy Garland.' Actress Barbara Windsor, chose to Carry On visiting the Krays after their imprisonment. Another friend was Diana Dors.

**'PEER AND A GANGSTER: YARD INQUIRY'** - *Sunday Mirror* [Front page, 12/7/64]

The first Kray scandal to hit the tabloids concerned Ron's alleged homosexual affair with Lord Boothby. Their association began when Ronnie sought investment advice for a Nigerian development project. A mutual business associate (Ernest Shinwell) arranged the liaison, where Boothby and Kray discovered they shared common interests - particularly in young men. They became friends, but their nights on-the-town attracted attention and sensational stories appeared.

Pearson recalls that according to the *Sunday Mirror*, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner had: *'Ordered a top-level investigation into the alleged homosexual relationship between a peer who was a "household name" and a leading thug in the London underworld, who was involved in West End protection rackets. ... Inquiring into Mayfair parties the thug and the peer had been to, the peer's weekend visits to Brighton along with a number of "prominent public men", his relationship with certain East End gangsters "and a number of clergymen".'*

The next day: *'New Scotland Yard ... prepared a public statement denying the suggestion that Her Majesty's Commissioner of Police was starting a private witch-hunt against titled homosexuals.'* However on 16th July, the *Mirror* claimed to have *'THE PICTURE WE DARE NOT PRINT ... a well-known member of the House of Lords seated on a sofa with a gangster who leads the biggest protection racket London has ever known'*.

Boothby retaliated quickly with a letter published in *the Times*, identifying himself, disclaiming the allegations and refuting his homosexuality. The *Daily Mirror* published 'an unqualified apology' and paid Boothby £40,000 in damages. Although Ronnie was unable to claim financial remuneration, 'the Boothby affair' helped the Krays by discouraging media and police attention.

Whatever their relationship, Boothby and Kray were more involved in homosexual intrigues than they admitted. But there was no substance to their alleged affair. In **THE UNDERWORLD** Duncan Campbell writes of:

*'Friendly letters from Boothby, thanking Ronnie for a box of Corona cigars, and showing that he had known Ronnie for much longer than he claimed. There was also a photograph, taken at the Society Club, of Boothby with Ronnie, Billy Exley and other members of the Firm. In the centre of the photograph, as Pearson put it, "was a teenage boy. On either side of him sat Ronnie Kray and Boothby, looking as if unable to decide which of them would eat first."' [Penguin/BBC,1994]*

Ronnie later reflected:

*'As for myself, I was relieved that people now knew about my homosexuality. I didn't have to hide my leanings any more. I didn't feel any shame then - I don't feel any now ... There is nothing necessarily weak about a homosexual man - and I believe he does no wrong ... I hate people who pick on homosexuals. ... Some time later another gangster called me 'a fat poof' - and he died for it.'*

**OUR STORY** - Reg and Ron Kray (Pan,1988)

The later events mentioned, are renowned in underworld history...

## **BULLIT in the HEAD**

By 1965, the Kray's London Empire was big enough for them to pursue international interests. Ron ventured to New York and approached the American Mafia with a deal. Mafia Godfathers were impressed by his offer - which would gain them access to Britain's gambling industry. Much to Ronnie's disappointment, the Mafia were no longer the gun-totting hoodlums he romanticised. They wanted low profile, secure investments.

Unfortunately the Krays were fighting a feud against South London's expanding mob, the Richardson gang. In an attempt to avert mob-war, a meeting was set-up to establish boundaries. However the Richardsons were renowned for torture and employed sadistic thugs like 'Mad' Frankie Fraser and George Cornell. Tensions continued to grow and when the Mafia wanted to visit, violence seemed inevitable. To avoid headline news, the Krays decided to inform the Richardsons about the Mafia deal.

*'The negotiations were actually between the Krays and the Richardsons - the others were there merely for protection. ... But Cornell was doing his best to stir things up. ... Then he did a very stupid thing. In front of all those people - our own men and top men from the other side - he said, 'Take no notice of Kray. He's just a big, fat poof.' From the moment he said it he was dead.'* - Ron Kray

Initially, the twins planned to take-out the whole Richardson gang in one swoop. The Richardsons were just as crazy and on 8th March 1966, attacked Mr Smith's Club in Catford, expecting to surprise the whole Kray gang. There followed a bloody battle between two gangs. When the smoke cleared the only Kray member present (Richard Hart) was dead. The Richardsons were misinformed and hit the wrong gang! All bar one of the Richardsons were either in hospital, or under arrest. The one who got away was Cornell...but not for long. Next night, Cornell was spotted in The Blind Beggar, Whitechapel. Ron vividly remembers:

*'I unpacked my 9mm Mauser automatic ... called Scotch Jack Dickson and told him to bring the car round. ... At 8:30 p.m. precisely we arrived at the pub ... I could not have felt calmer...*

*It was very quiet and gloomy inside the pub. There was an old bloke sitting by himself in the public bar and three people in the saloon bar: two blokes at a table and George Cornell sitting alone on a stool at the far end of the bar. As we walked in the barmaid was putting on a record. It was the Walker Brothers and it was called 'The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Any More'. For George Cornell that was certainly true.*

*As we walked towards him he turned round and a sort of sneer came over his face. 'Well, look who's here,' he said.*

*I never said anything. I just felt hatred for this sneering man. I took out my gun and held it towards his face. Nothing was said, but his eyes told me he thought the whole thing was a bluff. I shot him in the forehead. He fell forward onto the bar. There was some blood on the counter. That's all that happened. Nothing more.'*

The Krays' reputation was enough to prevent anyone from squealing.

Eventually, even the police began to take notice. After Reggie killed Jack 'the Hat' McVitie (a low-life criminal) evidence against the Krays was mounting, and their friends were cracking under police pressure. At 7am on 9th May 1968, 'Nipper' Read of the Yard and his small army of coppers arrested the Krays in their beds. Ronnie was sleeping with a new, blond haired guy. Neither Kray would name any associates under interrogation. They each got life sentences, with a recommended minimum of thirty years.