

*Fifty Years of the Brigadier*

# LETHBRIDGE STEWART



SHORT  
STORY  
COLLECTION

# LETHBRIDGE-STEWART

## SHORT STORY COLLECTION

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Based on the BBC television serials by  
Mervyn Haisman & Henry Lincoln

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Sean Alexander



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# **Boys Don't Cry**

Sean Alexander

Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart took the call on a bright spring morning with just the hint of rain. It was Mr Newton, the headmaster. Judging by his tone of voice it was not a social call.

‘Mr Lethbridge-Stewart, can you come up to the school, immediately? There’s been an incident.’

‘Incident?’ Lethbridge-Stewart had worked under the current headmaster for three years now, and he was not one for hyperbole. If there had been ‘an incident’ then it was something very serious.

‘A death.’ Mr Newton paused for a moment, before gathering his thoughts into words. Lethbridge-Stewart noticed the faint crackle on the line for the first time. ‘One of the boys. Samuels. Matron found him this morning.’

Lethbridge-Stewart sat back a little until his chair creaked. One of the boys dead? It seemed inexplicable. Brendon School for Boys had an impeccable record, one that had best suited the former brigadier.

‘Look, Headmaster, I appreciate you calling to let me know, but this kind of thing is out of my league these days. If you want me to help prepare a press release or something, perhaps go round and see the parents...’

‘It’s precisely your experience that I need here,

Lethbridge-Stewart.’ Mr Newton’s insistence was difficult to refute. There was something about this incident that wasn’t quite as straightforward as it seemed. And a death, any death, at Brendon was far from straightforward in the first place.

‘This boy, Samuels,’ continued Mr Newton. ‘The coroner thinks he’s died of fright.’

Lethbridge-Stewart had never become accustomed to death. Ever since National Service, death had been a constant companion. He’d had men die under his command, been forced to take the lives of others in the line of duty, kill or be killed. Yet the spectre of death’s cold and clammy hand, its violent and unexpected occurrence, had always been an enigma to him. Even when in command of both the Fifth and UNIT, death had taken many forms and faces. He’d watched friends and colleagues die, only for them to pop back up as though the natural rules of life didn’t apply.

Lethbridge-Stewart approached the draw upon which the boy, Samuels, had been placed. With a nod from the waiting headmaster, a hospital porter unlocked the steel door and pulled out a thin metal stretcher covered by a single sheet.

‘I thought you might like to take a look at the boy

before his parents get here. For the formal identification.'

Mr Newton's tone was as business-like as it had been earlier on the telephone. This was not a time for any macabre levity or attempts at gallows humour; a boy under the Mr Newton's charge was dead, and his grave countenance only reflected the pain and loss he himself felt.

The porter pulled back the sheet to reveal the body of Samuels beneath. Death had left a terrible mark on the boy's face: a rictus of surprise mixed with fear, stopping his heart with all the force of an electric charge. Despite having seen more than his share of death in the field, Lethbridge-Stewart had witnessed this look only once before. A young private, out on patrol whilst under Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart's command in the London Underground during what became known as The London Event.

'Well?' Mr Newton's question dragged Lethbridge-Stewart back across the years, returning him to the chilly walls of the hospital morgue.

'Yes, I've seen this before.' Aware of the curious look being thrown his way by the hospital porter, Lethbridge-Stewart gestured for Mr Newton to step away, allowing him to gather his thoughts before

fixing him with a stern stare.

‘I think we should retire to the school, Headmaster? I rather think a stiff drink is required. For both of us.’

Mr Newton’s study was characteristically austere and musty. The accustomed bookcase stuffed with books, folios and files stood adjacent to a tall window whose parted blinds allowed the weak morning sun to bleed through. The carpet was newly laid, being about the only fresh aspect in a room that smelled of age and history.

‘Have a seat.’ Mr Newton motioned to a brown leather armchair poised at an acute angle from the room’s dominating desk, itself littered with papers, stationery and a telephone whose cord looped lazily halfway to the floor.

Lethbridge-Stewart sat, gazing with interest around the wood panelled room, focusing occasionally on the framed photographs showing the man opposite him in various stages of his life: as a young man collecting what appeared to be a university diploma; older and surrounded by a form of adolescent children, each smiling the optimistic grins of the young and untarnished by either experience or grief; dressed in cricketing whites and blazer while shaking hands with

the opposite team's skipper. The only other photos stood on the desk above Lethbridge-Stewart's knees. Though their surfaces faced away from him, Lethbridge-Stewart guessed that both the Mr Newton's wife and children gazed back at him in serene stillness.

Mr Newton sat behind the desk and opened a lower drawer, pulling out two chunky crystal-cut glasses and an ice bucket. From another drawer he removed a half-empty bottle of scotch, twisted the cap and splashed two generous measures into each receptacle, jiggling the ice within.

Lethbridge-Stewart picked up the proffered drink and swallowed a generous gulp, his teeth immediately reacting to the chill of the ice and the sting of the liquor. Mr Newton, he noticed, took barely a sip, abandoning his glass as though the pouring of it had been merely for decorum, not desire.

'So.' Mr Newton gazed directly at Lethbridge-Stewart as he resisted taking another mouthful so soon after the first one. Some decorum was called for at least, especially at ten thirty on a Friday morning.

'There isn't *really* much I can tell you, Headmaster.' Lethbridge-Stewart lowered his glass, settling for the wafting fumes from his glass in place of another swig. 'As you know, the things I saw as a soldier were...

unconventional, to say the least. Not to mention the fact that *most* of it is protected by the Official Secrets Act.' *And you wouldn't believe it anyway*, Lethbridge-Stewart ruminated to himself.

Mr Newton leaned forward in his chair, the leather creaking in protest as he did so, knitting his fingers together with the calm and sure practice of a patient negotiator. 'A boy is dead, Lethbridge-Stewart. Subject to the post-mortem results, I may well have a full-scale inquiry on my hands. Not to mention the hullabaloo of the press and media.'

Mr Newton's tone was pragmatic, but beneath was tinged with a compassion borne from a lifetime of caring for his young charges.

Lethbridge-Stewart thought of his own daughter, Kate, and how the break-up of his first marriage to her mother had often left him fearful of the impact their separation would have on her. He carried enough guilt for that alone, so how would he possibly deal with an event as tragic and sickening as this?

'When I was a colonel, I saw a young private dead whilst under my command. His face was just like that of Samuels'. The coroner concluded that he'd suffered a massive cardiac arrest. His medical had brought up no signs of any pathological condition or inherited

illness.’ Here Lethbridge-Stewart paused, the events of 1969 once more flooding his thoughts. ‘He was sixteen years old and had only joined the army. It was his first active engagement. He was keen and eager to please. When I sent him down that tunnel I had no doubt he could deal with the situation, regardless of how young and inexperienced he was. He was going to make a fine soldier, perhaps one day even become a senior NCO.’ Lethbridge-Stewart stopped and looked out of the window where a PE class had just taken to the field. ‘I sent him to his death.’

Mr Newton had listened quietly. ‘The parents will be asking a lot of questions. Questions to which I don’t have any of the answers.’ He looked at Lethbridge-Stewart with a mixture of sympathy and yearning, as though this retired brigadier held all the answers. ‘If there’s *anything* you can tell me that may explain why this healthy boy, with the whole world ahead of him, is now lying in a cold drawer...’ Mr Newton paused before his words caught in his throat. ‘Then now is the time.’

Lethbridge-Stewart returned from looking out at the game of rugby. The glass of scotch he held in his hand felt warm, the ice all but vanished leaving the tumbler swilling with a brown and murky puddle of

Old Grouse. He necked it all in one large gulp.

‘Headmaster, do you believe there are alien beings from other worlds...?’

When the boy Samuels’ parents arrived they were escorted into Mr Newton’s own private quarters. By then Lethbridge-Stewart was back in his quarters – really little more than a converted potting shed – having left Mr Newton’s study full of thoughts about the London Underground and the events of so many years ago. It was to that time that he had returned, leafing through some old correspondence that he had kept religiously filed in a fading manila folder with some rudimentary string tied around it. The soft tick of the carriage clock awarded him on his final day in service was the only background noise as he looked through papers, some of which were now thirty years old, which helped tell the tale of his career.

Another large tumbler of scotch, this time from Lethbridge-Stewart’s own private store, sat on the arm of a chair as he picked out the dog-eared sepia page that he had been fruitlessly looking for up to now. The letter was hand-written in neat, flowing handwriting and was addressed to “Corporal Lethbridge-Stewart, British Army” at his old barrack address. Lethbridge

-Stewart began to read.

*Dear Sir,*

*My wife and I would like to express our extreme gratitude and heartfelt thanks for the manner in which you assisted us following the sad events involving our son, Peter, recently. We would also like to record our appreciation for the words you said at Peter's funeral during what we're sure was an extremely busy and stressful time for you following the events in London. Although it seems we will never truly know the events which led to Peter's death (governmental clauses preventing the release of such information) we have been assured by both your professional and personal candour that our son was a highly valued and respected member of your command, and that he died in the performance of his duty to the highest of standards.*

*Peter had always dreamed of joining the army ever since he was a young boy playing with his toy soldiers on the living room floor. It is of great comfort at this time to know that not only was Peter's ambition fulfilled, but that he was fortunate enough to have such a warm and appreciate commanding officer in his first assignment.*

*Yours,*

*Robert and Eileen Preston.*

Lethbridge-Stewart allowed the letter to fall into his lap, crumpling it slightly with his resting hand. The

view out of his quarters was restricted by the outside wall of the school gymnasium, and as such allowed only the brightest of noon sunlight through its smeared and cracked windows. As a result, the whole room was cast into semi-darkness, with the small portable table lamp by Lethbridge-Stewart's chair providing the main illumination. His face was cast in shadow, as were his thoughts. Cast adrift in the miasma of past events, he turned to the telephone perched on the corner of his desk and lifted the receiver. Dialling zero for the headmaster's office, he allowed the line to ring several times before, on the point of hanging up, the ringing stopped and a formal voice announced, 'Headmaster's office.'

'The parents – are they still here?'

Mr Newton's voice was almost expectant of such a question. 'Yes, we've just returned from the morgue. Formal identification has just been made. We're only waiting now for the coroner to issue a death certificate.'

'What will it say?' Lethbridge-Stewart juggled the half-full tumbler in his left hand, noting how it shook slightly.

'Death by natural causes. No suggestion of malice aforethought. The toxicology report will take a week, but there's nothing that's expected to say otherwise.'

The boy just died.' For the first time Mr Newton's tone took on a slightly arch feel. 'And I don't think any bug-eyed monsters from Mars came down and killed him, either.'

Lethbridge-Stewart grinned despite himself. 'I'd like to say some words, before they leave. If that's alright?'

'Yes, of course. I'll have Matron let them know.'

Lethbridge-Stewart found the parents of Matthew Samuels sitting in a corridor at the far end of the school, near to the teaching class where he usually took his pupils for Applied Mathematics. They were staring sullenly ahead, not making any kind of physical contact with one another and for all the world may have been waiting for a bus instead of pondering over the recent death of their only son.

The father wore a long, beige coat with a collar pulled up stiff against the elements; his wife a pleated tartan skirt with a plain white blouse. At her throat a cameo was neatly pinned.

Painfully aware of the constant squeak his shoes made on the highly polished floor, Lethbridge-Stewart drew up to them and cleared his throat.

'Mr and Mrs Samuels?' The questioning lilt was for

politeness. He knew exactly who they were.

Two pairs of eyes swivelled up to meet his, both swimming with a mixture of disbelief and regret. 'Yes,' they chorused.

'My name's Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart. I'm a teacher here at Brendon.' Lethbridge-Stewart paused, aware he was about to breach a carefully built bubble of control these grieving parents had been forced to build around themselves in such a short space of time. 'I wanted to express my extreme sadness at your loss.'

The eyes of the woman prickled, a sea of tears threatening to burst their dams and spill down her pale cheeks. The man saw reason to get to his feet and proffer his hand. Lethbridge-Stewart took it and gave it a gentle shake.

'Thank you,' said Mr Samuels, his voice raw from disuse more than emotion. Lethbridge-Stewart doubted that, in the last twelve hours, he had said more than a dozen or so words. 'Did you teach Matth... er, our son?'

Lethbridge-Stewart shook his head. 'No, I only teach from the third years onwards.' Aware that he seemed to be dismissing their son he continued. 'But I know he was a fine pupil, and a credit to you both.'

Mr Samuels pumped Lethbridge-Stewart's hand

like he was operating an old-fashioned water standpipe. The more he did so, it seemed the less Lethbridge-Stewart felt he meant it. Mrs Samuels managed to mouth a simple 'thank you' as she smoothed the pattern on her skirt, her gold wedding ring tarnished under the artificial light of the corridor.

Lethbridge-Stewart felt compelled to say at least *something* that would give these two some crumb of comfort, some indication that their pain would one day relent and relieve them of the agony of loss that now pinned them down. Trying to fall back on his training of thirty years hence, he thought of all the dead soldiers' families whose losses he'd had to break to them. Of Peter Preston's grieving mother and father standing at his graveside while their son was lowered down with full military honours.

He found that he couldn't. That was another life now, and Lethbridge-Stewart no longer had the empty words to fill their void.

Instead, he turned on his heel and left the Samuels alone in their private world. The squeak of his shoes soon ended as he reached his classroom, gently opened the door and disappeared inside.

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by Benjamin-Burford Jones

While visiting his mother, Lethbridge-Stewart is a little perturbed when Harold Chorley calls to ask for his help. A train from Bristol has gone missing, and Chorley is convinced it has something to do with the Keynsham Triangle, where over fifty people have vanished without trace since the early 1800s.

Elsewhere, Anne Travers is coming to terms with a loss in her family, and sets about preparing for a funeral. However, news reaches her that both Lethbridge-Stewart and Chorley have gone missing, and her help is required to find them. And, hopefully, solve the mystery of the Keynsham Triangle.

What connects the missing train to the Triangle, what has it got to do with a Wren from the 1940s, and just why does it appear that Lethbridge-Stewart and Chorley are in the village of Keynsham in 1815?

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