

jan bee landman

The Hands of
Bertie McGee



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a short mainstream story

by

Jan Bee Landman

The Hands of Bertie McGee

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I know it must sound callous, but Bertie McGee looked a repulsive little freak. I could hardly believe my eyes when I first saw him. Like a human crab he shuffled into Bob's Place, an old-fashioned oak-paneled saloon where I had just taken shelter from the rain. He barely stood four feet, with an enormous chest borne by skinny, bandy legs. The span of that chest would not have disgraced a man twice his size, but it made him look ridiculous and indeed somewhat sinister, as I said: like a crab. His head, topped by a shock of black hair, was of normal size but his forehead was so excessively large that it dwarfed the features below it. A black fringe of meeting eyebrows shaded his small cavernous eyes. His nose was short and fleshy with wide nostrils that bristled with hairs. A straight, thin-lipped mouth and a pointed chin completed his repellent face that was always darkened by a 5 o' clock shadow.

He really was a walking nightmare, an ogre from Dickensian slums, a kind of neanderthal man who nevertheless had a touch of melancholy about him. I often saw him before we really got to know each other. We had our drinks in the same place. That was all. And in a big city like ours, you could sit in

saloons beside one another till doomsday and never exchange a civil word. Whenever he was around, I observed him. He fascinated me and as I got to know him from afar, I also took a liking to him. I started to watch him the way I suppose nature-lovers watch the objects of their attention: patiently, closely and with a growing sense of involvement. In a way my monster did not appear so difficult to fathom and rarely did he seem so obvious as when he came in. The thrust with which he threw open the door was always a bit too violent, his bearing too cocky, his lips too tense, his glance too fierce. He always looked overwrought, like an athlete just before an important race, and appeared to balance on the verge of exhaustion, although not physically but rather mentally. The streets did it to him. His stroll through the heartless streets. And there were quite a lot of them. He told me about it once, later, when we had become sort of friends. His walk to the saloon forced him through more than a dozen streets. Almost two miles. Two miles of running the gauntlet, unimaginable to us, ordinary people, who may wear out the soles of their shoes without ever attracting a second look. It took me some time to grasp this in its full brutality, but

when I finally did, it almost brought tears to my eyes. Sentimental perhaps, but so what? There was something heroic in this little cretin who would live as a normal human being, even if it choked him. And choking is perhaps the right word to describe the agony he underwent on his way to Bob's Place. Curious stares everywhere, covert or brazen, as surprise turned into unfeeling amusement or revulsion. Voices everywhere. mostly whispering but also loud and cutting to the quick. And he was helpless outside. What could he do? Slug it out with the whole world? Things were different in the bar. He would put up with little there.

I clearly remember one afternoon when two Scandinavian sailors were inside, sopping drunk, boisterous and troublesome, built like heavy-weight wrestlers. They had been ogling Bertie for a while and became more and more offensive in their taunts. I was on the point of making a fool of myself by interfering when suddenly Bertie rose. Faster than a jumping spider he pounced on the first one and before the bully could even move he had suffered a barrage of thudding blows in the stomach that made him double up and crash to the floor, dragging along

his friend with barstools and all. Bertie's immediate victim was out, but his mate struggled to his feet, towering above Bertie like King Kong. He uttered a snarling curse and clenched his meaty fists. But again Bertie demonstrated his uncanny powers. He took a flying leap, sort of climbed into the man and dealt him such a blow on the nose that it cracked and spurted blood. Dropping back on his feet, Bertie grabbed a stool, swung it like a baseball bat and brought it down with crushing force on the head of his opponent who, already dazed, toppled like a tree. Without paying any further attention to his victims, Bertie ambled back to the stool beside mine, climbed on to it and shot me a fierce, questioning glance, as if he were looking for an excuse to knock me out as well.

"Good show," I said, to humor him.

He seemed to like that and grinned, revealing a hole where his front teeth should have been.

"Muscle," he said. "Arms of steel, mine are."

"Remarkable," I said.

He froze at once.

"What do you mean, remarkable? For a dwarf?"

I looked as innocent as I possibly could. "Well, you're not exactly a giant."

His grin returned.

"No, that's true enough."

"Mind if I buy the next drink? After all, you did us all a favor," I said, nodding my head at the two bullies, who were just being bundled out by the other regulars.

Bertie gave an irritable little shrug of his shoulders. "I don't like being stood drinks. I can buy my own. But all right. I'll have a Bourbon. On the rocks. Not that it'll do me much good. Booze don't agree with me, or rather: I don't agree with booze. But what the hell. There ain't much else."

He fell silent and lapsed into thought, staring at a half-empty beer glass in front of him. In the meantime I ordered the drinks. When he got his he downed most of it at one gulp.

"This is my hang-up, you see. Liquor." He looked at me sideways, craftily, with a crooked smile on his all but lipless mouth. He really was a sinister looking character.

"You don't believe me, do you? You're thinking it's my size that's my problem. Well, it ain't. In fact it

could have been my fortune. See these hands?" He raised them. Big hands they were, not only in proportion to the small man they belonged to, but big as such, and yet strangely elegant, like the hands of a piano player.

"Hands is what they are, but I mean *hands*." He stressed the word as if I might not understand it. "The most important tools of a jockey, you see. Everything else is trimming: weight, balance, legs, they don't mean a thing. Anyone can get those if they try hard enough. But not these hands. You've got to be born with them, And I was." He smiled broadly, took up his glass and made the ice-cubes revolve with a tinkling sound. His face softened.

"My parents made me a jockey. What else were they supposed to do with a mite like me? They put me on a horse when I was eleven. I guess they would have put me on the devil if that would've gotten rid of me. Damn it, my old man never looked me straight in the face once. Not one fucking once. But who can blame him? After all, I ain't a pretty sight, and he was, a real handsome fellow, a ladykiller, sort of. But no matter, I was eleven. I can still picture it now." He looked away, a faint smile softening his features. "Winter and snow

and that mountain of a horse standing there prancing and snorting and blowing big puffs of steaming breath from his nostrils like a dragon. I was scared stiff, I can tell you. But they just lifted me into the saddle. Then it happened. There I was, high as a god, and I could look down on people. Wow! It seemed heaven itself. Those faces turned up to me. My fear evaporated like the steam from that horse's nose. Instant happiness. And to top it all I felt the mouth of the horse in my hands. Do you hear what I'm saying? Not the reins, hell no, I felt the mouth at the end of them, right through the metal of the bit and the leather of the reins. I don't know how to explain. Ever rode a horse?"

"No."

"Well, it was as if I had the very soul of that dumb critter at my fingertips. A race is nothing but knowing your horse, sensing exactly what's going on under you, whether he's exhausting himself, whether he's doing too much or too little or just enough to keep on going and have a little edge left for the final furlong. And I knew my horses. I could squeeze the last drop of energy from them at the winning-post. With these hands. And that's why I won everything I could

possibly win. I brought out the best in my horses. And there ain't many who can say that. So you can imagine how much success I had. I was simply the best."

As he talked he grew very excited and was literally bobbing on his stool, sketching invisible structures with his hands and talking into the glass before him with only an occasional sidelong glance at me. I was fascinated by the little man, his zeal, his conviction.

"I had it," he said vehemently, "I simply had. Here, in these hands."

He raised them in front of his face and stared at them for some time. Then he lowered them again, grasped his glass and emptied its contents into his mouth, ice-cubes and all. He fell into a gloomy silence, munching his ice.

I waited a while for him to continue, but when it became obvious that he was not going to do so, I risked a cautious question.

"And then?"

He gave me a quick, almost hostile look. "Then?" he asked.

I nodded.

His eyes returned to his empty glass, which he took up and revolved in both hands. The lines of his face seemed to deepen, as if thin threads were being drawn through the flesh.

"Then?" he repeated thoughtfully, "Then things went wrong. Well, that's to say, they didn't exactly go wrong. Things had always been wrong from the start. Too much anger. Hell, look at me. Wouldn't you be angry if you looked like me? I tried to drown my anger in booze. But it only fuelled my temper. Always exploding at the wrong time. Always getting into fights. Why, I once punched another jockey from his horse right in the middle of a race. Got suspended again and again. So I got less and less rides, no matter how good I was. In the end nobody wanted me anymore. Now I've been a nobody stable hand for five years. But what the hell. It's okay. I like looking after horses. At least those dumb brutes don't laugh at me. Gentle critters they are. Pleasant company." A faint, almost tender smile softened his face. But only for a moment. Then it hardened again.

"I'm just no good with people," he said, "Or perhaps I'm just no good." He looked at me with cold, defiant

eyes. They were pale blue, like ice. "Yeah, I guess you could say I'm a mean bastard," he said.

"I don't think so," I said with a smile. He sneered.

"What the hell do you know?"

"Enough."

He continued to stare at me as if I smelled. I did not bat an eyelid, though it took some effort, but I meant what I said. This little hostile fellow had something that moved me. I don't exactly know how to put it, but it had a lot to do with his defiance, his guts. He was an outcast, sure enough, but one that would never submit to the pity of the charitable. He was a solitary street dog that fought the battle for his meager existence snarling to the last drop of blood. Suddenly it seemed to dawn upon him that I really stood on his side

His icy stare melted into a look of bewilderment. He blinked a few times and looked away.

"Have a drink on me," he said softly and raised his voice to the bartender.

"Hey, Bob, give this guy something to drink."

Having said this he swung down from his stool and scampered out of the saloon without a further word.

I was left behind in a pensive mood. There had been times when I, like many people, had disguised my discomfort at cripples behind black jokes. Not that I had ever meant any harm. Certainly not, but I had simply refused to give serious thought to those less fortunate. The world is so brimful of injustice that everyone gets his share sooner or later, so I never saw any need to stand and stare at others getting theirs. But the glimpse I had now caught of this fellow creature overwhelmed me. Life is a burden to many of us, but for some it's so darned heavy you can't understand how they bear it.

Bob placed the drink in front of me.

"You must be some kind of wizard," he grinned.

"How come?"

"For old Bertie to stand you a drink. God almighty, there's a skinflint for you. I've never seen him give away as much as a match. Scrooge was small time beside him."

I felt strangely flattered, honored really, but a little uneasy too. Why me? What had I done to deserve it?

A few months passed in which I saw my new friend

regularly at Bob's Place. But we did not speak much. I'm not much of a talker and he was often so engrossed in himself and his bitterness that he hardly saw me.

Then, one day in early spring, a different Bertie entered the bar. He was beaming! Without his customary bravado he hurried inside, looked about and made straight for the table at which I was sitting. Of course I was madly curious. Nothing but a miracle could have cheered an inveterate miser like Bertie. He stopped at the table and flashed his rare, toothless grin at me. As he drew out a chair he loudly demanded drinks for everyone, which gave Bob such a shock that he actually staggered behind his counter.

"Have you gone mad, Bertie?" he yelled.

"You bet I have," returned Bertie, and sat down.

"You'll never guess," he said to me.

"Well, let's have it then, before I go mad too."

"I," he declared in a ringing voice, "I, Bertie McGee, am riding in the DERBY;"

"Bravo!" shouted Bob, and the other dozen or so regulars all started clapping their hands and stomping their feet.

I put out my hand at once, which I lived to regret for several days, because Bertie almost crushed it. Nevertheless I managed a sickly smile and urged him to continue.

"One man's meat is another's poison," he said, "Ever heard of Huckleberry Bouncer?"

"No."

"No, of course you wouldn't have. Well, I'll be damned if it isn't the fastest colt in the nation this year. Only, they don't know. Man, I'm not only riding, I'm gonna win, too. Imagine, Bertie McGee, the misfit, the drunken slob, the man who could have done anything and did nothing is finally gonna make it big time. Wow, it feels so fine, it's like a miracle, one hell of a miracle."

He erupted into a hiccupy sort of laughter. Bob served the drinks around and boisterous cheers echoed through the room. Bertie's face was aglow with pleasure. His joy was catching and I, too, couldn't help laughing and feeling good. Bertie resumed his tale.

"It's like this. At our stable we have three runners for the Derby. Two of Colonel Brown's horses: Billington, the whitehot favorite, Lost Forever, his

pacemaker, and one of Senator DeWitt's: Huckleberry Bouncer. As always the Senator had a retainer on our first jockey, Joe Green. But what do you think that sucker decides to do? He goes and falls from his horse."

Breaking into a wild whoop, Bertie threw himself against the back of his chair and screamed with laughter. His whole body shook with it.

"Hoho," he yelled, "From his horse. Just like that. Wham, like a sack of potatoes. " Again he fell into a fit of merriness, holding his stomach and turning red, while tears streamed down his face. It took several minutes before he had calmed down enough to continue.

"So that left the Senator without a jockey," he panted at last.

"But surely he could bring in another?"

"That's just it. He could not. To begin with, all top jockeys were already retained. Secondly, the Senator is a strange one. He only wants his horses ridden by people he knows personally. So he was stuck. He had a horse but no rider. And that's where I came in. First let me say that the Senator and me go way back. He always had a soft spot for me. He's a bit of a boozer

himself, you see. We were kindred souls, so to speak. He always understood if I was late for the umpteenth time or drunk on my horse, and he would curse the daylight out of me, but never without a wink and a pat on the back afterwards. If it hadn't been for the Senator I'd have been washed up long ago, and I'd never have gotten this job as a stable hand.

This morning it happened. There I am, struggling with this vicious hangover, mad at everything, cleaning out Huck's stable, when the Senator comes to look at him, together with Walter, that sonofabitch trainer," Bertie interrupted himself to spit on the floor in disgust. "The Senator was furious because Walter kept on harping about outside jockeys. Then the Senator sees me."

"There's our man," he exclaims, "Good old Bertie McGee..... hey Bertie, what do say, you old centaur, you think you can handle Bouncer?"

I was trembling in my boots, I can tell you, after all, I haven't had a real ride in five years. But I didn't hesitate for a moment.

"For you. Sir?" I said, "Anytime." Ah you should have seen his face...."

Something like a tear glistened in Bertie's eye.

"I got him right here, you see." He placed both his big hands on his heart. "Damn it, I did. But I meant it. I'd wade through pools of fire for that old Senator. Of course, Walter had to object, the bum, muttering that I was too old, too rusty, without a license, things like that. But the Senator wouldn't hear of it. He had made up his mind and when that happens there's only one of two things you can do: go along or kill him. So Walter had to give in. And now..... now...." Bertie's face became a grotesque mask, his yellow, ruined teeth bared to the gums, his eyes disappearing among cheerful folds.

"Now I'm gonna make good, all the way. I'm gonna win that race. I'm gonna make true a dream that I gave up about twenty years ago. It feels so good it's almost as if I'm gonna revive a stillborn foal."

He punched my shoulder.

"Damn it, Johnnyboy, this is some feeling here. Have another drink. Bob, give them all another drink. No, two!"

We got scandalously drunk that day. Last time before the race, Bertie said. Beginning tomorrow he would live a hermit's life, training for the big day. He wouldn't be seen again before the race had been run.

But before the week was out he came through the door again, or rather a ghostly apparition resembling Bertie McGee did. The creases of his face were deeper than ever. He curtly ordered a bottle of Bourbon and withdrew into a far corner of the room. I went up to him.

"Hey, Bertie, what's up?"

He didn't move.

"Go hang yourself," he muttered, almost inaudibly.

I hesitated to speak again, familiar with his temper and strength.

"You serious?" I ventured.

He looked at me wordlessly and I was shocked by his expression. A mask of pain and despair. He looked as if he had spent years in a concentration camp. I had seen plenty of sorrow in my days, but the eyes of Bertie then betrayed something beyond total desperation.

"Bertie, in heaven's name, what's happened? Your horse dead?"

He sadly shook his head.

"Not dead. But it pretty much amounts to it. They don't want me to win."

"They?"

"Yeah. They. You needn't know more. You're not going to either. "They" is enough. And "They" have discreetly let me know that I can forget all about it."

My first reaction was disbelief. There are things in life you prefer not to know. The existence of "Theys" is such a thing.

"But I thought nobody knew how good he was?" I said.

Bertie nodded and filled his longdrink glass with whiskey. "They didn't. But, man, am I dumb! Too blistering dumb for words. Day before yesterday we had a gallop. The three of us. The order was that Forever Lost would set the pace and then Billington and Huck had to go all out. And fool that I was, I let him go. I couldn't help myself. He was moving so majestically that I just had to let him go. Man, he flew. He *flew* I'm telling you. They could have given Billington roller-skates, and still he would have been nowhere. Walter looked a regular snowman when we returned, all white and speechless. The old Senator was hopping like a rabbit with excitement. He has been trying to win this race all his life. And now it was finally going to happen. Then, this morning, that

varmint of a Walter comes slinking up to me with his little hint that "They" don't want Billington to lose. O damn, damn, damn it all."

He gulped down his whiskey as if it were water and glowered at me.

"Do you know what that means?" he asked.

"No. "

"It means you do as you're told. Blindly. They don't kill, you see. They maim. Oh yeah, they're experts at that. They hurt you so bad that you're glad to lick their shoes. I know. I watched."

I gave an involuntary start, but he waved my reaction aside, filling up his glass again.

"No, no, nothing like that. I had been invited for a friendly warning. Sick as a dog it made me. Man, I couldn't sleep for weeks. I know I've got no choice. My last dream has crumbled. It's time to think of dying. Damnation."

His face convulsed frightfully. He clenched his glass so tightly that I feared it would break. All of a sudden, in a mad gesture, he threw it from him and it smashed to pieces on the floor, stifling conversation all around. In the silence that followed Bertie rose from his chair. For a moment he stood motionless,

then he banged his fist on the table with such violence that the bottle jumped up and crashed to the floor as well.

"It's a shame," he bellowed, "A shame, a godforsaken shame." He staggered to the middle of the floor. The other customers looked on with pale, startled faces.

"Do you know what it's like? Do you know? To be a monstrosity, a horrid little freak, a misfit that should've been smothered at birth and bottled in a jar for exhibition at country fairs? No, you don't. God damn it, you don't know one fucking little bit about it, with your teeny-weeny fucking worries about women and jobs and hell knows what other trifles. You don't know how it feels to wake up deformed every damned day of your life. Never being able to cross a street without being gaped at, pointed at, laughed at, being hurt to the bottom of your soul until you've got no soul left to hurt. Nothing left but a mere sewer through which all your foul-mouthed shit can slither. You know nothing, nothing at all. You're nothing but wells of stinking shit. Gaping assholes, that's what you are and you make me wanna throw up."

While he ranted his face grew redder and redder, and by the time he had finished, it had the color of raw meat. For a moment I thought he would go berserk and massacre the lot of us. But instead he darted to the door and disappeared.

A lengthy silence lingered. Then Bob spoke.

"Next one's on the house, boys," he said solemnly, "For Bertie. The poor sod can't really help it."

That week I didn't see him again, nor the next. I was just beginning to fear the worst, when to my relief I saw his name among the jockeys listed for the big race. I decided to go and watch, although I did not like racing much. To me there was something degrading in small men punishing big animals for sport.

It was a day of fine weather: dry and sunny and with a mild breeze that brought coolness but no chill. I had planned to arrive at the very last moment to spare myself the annoyance that crowds always cause me. As a result I nearly missed the race, but I just managed to get a place near the winning-post as they went off. During the greater part I could not see a

single horse from where I stood and had to make do with the near hysterical voice of the speaker.

Only when the field turned into the final stretch, did the horses come into my view and did things become interesting.

As expected, Forever Lost headed the field, but this soon changed. He had done his duty and dropped back. His place was taken by two horses, an oily-black one and a gray, whose names I could not catch but who were loudly encouraged by people near me. Billington was third, advancing rapidly, chased by four others with Huckleberry Bouncer just behind those. In spite of everything his position disappointed me, which was quite ridiculous, for I could hardly have expected anything else.

The horses approached at breakneck speed, their nostrils agape, hooves wildly clawing, ripping clods of earth from the soil as they beat out their thunderous gradually swelling drum roll. The small huddled men on top of them were swinging their whips like frantic satyrs.

All around me spectators went into a frenzy, shouting their favorites onwards at the top of their voices, filling the air with a mighty roar that almost

drowned the sound of the oncoming cavalry, but not quite, as the hoof beats grew louder and louder. Billington drew alongside the black and the gray in the lead. His name eclipsed all others in the shouting. Then the speaker uttered a loud yell.

"Huckleberry Bouncer on the outside."

And sure enough. Alone, strangely isolated from the field, in the middle of the track, a big bay was advancing with long powerful strides. His manes were exceptionally long and fluttered like pinions. I raised my binoculars, but my hands trembled so badly that I had trouble with my aim. Nevertheless I managed to get Bertie in my sights, looking outright ridiculous in an orange blouse and an oversized cap.

Never, as long as I live, shall I forget the face beneath it. Deathly white it was and petrified in grimness. Like a zombie Bertie rode his horse on. Not once did he use his whip. He stood motionless in the stirrups and seemed to float above his straining mount. As I kept my eye on Bertie I could not see his position in the race, but a sudden change in the roar of shouts spoke for itself. The name Billington died away and a buzz of amazement took its place, pierced far and wide by isolated and truly homerical shouts

for Huckleberry Bouncer. I lowered my glasses just in time to see Bertie bring his horse past the winning-post well ahead of Billington.

I must confess that a lump swelled in my throat. He had done it. That crazy old gnome had gone and done it. A flock of emotions swept through me. Above all I was deeply moved, overjoyed at his success, but at the same time I felt a sickening fear. They would massacre him. In my mind's eye I could almost see him being beaten to pulp in a cold gloomy cellar by a sinister gang of thugs. Trembling with excitement I tried to force my way to the winner's enclosure, but I could get nowhere near it. There was nothing for me to do but leave.

That night I did not sleep a wink. Of course I had gone to the bar after the race, thinking wishfully that Bertie might show up. But he did not. Nor did he do so the following day, which I spent waiting - against my better judgment - at Bob's Place. Then I could stand it no longer. I began making inquiries. It took some trouble and time, but a day or so later I ended up at the squalid boarding house where he lived. His landlady opened the door: a bad-tempered, slovenly brute of a woman in a flimsy dress, who did not have

one kind word to spare for Bertie. That drunken ogre, she said, had run amok again, but this time he had found his match, for they had all but killed him.

Although I had mentally prepared myself for such a tiding, it could not have shocked me more if it had caught me unawares. In spite of my loathing for the bitch I mustered enough tact to wring from her the name of the hospital where Bertie had been taken. Within an hour I stood in front of his room. Again I braced myself, again in vain. I had expected much, but not a cheerful Bertie, sitting bolt upright in bed, swathed like a mummy and whistling as he pasted newspaper clippings into a scrapbook. A man-sized bouquet of orange roses stood beside the bed.

I believe he smiled when he saw me, but that was hard to tell on account of the swollen condition of the small part of his face that was left uncovered by bandages. But his joyous shout was unmistakable.

"Hey, Johnnyboy, my old pal. Come in, come in."

I was dumbfounded, not knowing whether I should rejoice at his cheerfulness or grieve at the state he was in. The one thing I did know was that I had rarely felt so much affection for anyone. He beckoned me and we shook hands warmly; his had lost none of its

power, and hurt me as much as before, but this time I could not care less.

"Look here," he mumbled, shoving his scrapbook towards me. It was filled with newspaper articles on the Big Race. Blazing headlines like: Glorious Comeback of Bertie McGee; Lightning Bertie Strikes Again; An Old Fox Outsmarts All The Hunters; Huckleberry Bertie Forever; Justice At Last: Bertie McGee Wins The Big One. The last line kind of choked me up. At any rate I had some difficulty in reading on, because my eyes went blurry.

Bertie's muffled voice shook me out of it.

"Ain't it great?"

I looked at his swollen, bloodshot eyes.

"You bet it is."

He nodded eagerly.

"You in pain?" I asked.

"Yeah," he grinned, "They've messed me up real good. I'll probably never ride again. But who cares? Now I'm no dwarf no more. I'm Bertie McGee the Winner. The one and only."

The glow on his face seemed to radiate right through the bandages.

"It's great Bertie, real great."

At that moment the door opened. A very young and very pretty nurse entered, smiling, but chilled when she saw me.

"And what do you think you're doing here?" she said sharply.

"I.... er.... a nurse in the hall told me...."

"Indeed? Well, I'm in charge here and I'm telling you that Mr McGee must rest. You will leave at once."

She was so solemn in her fierce sense of duty that I hastened to comply. In spite of everything I avoided shaking hands with Bertie again.

"Hey Bertie, I'll be seeing you."

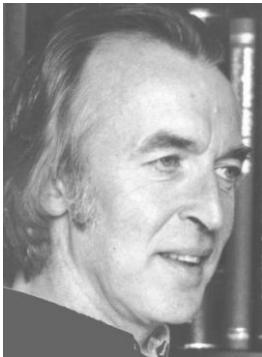
Like a sovereign giving a subject leave to retire, Bertie made a little benevolent gesture with his hand and returned to his book, muttering in himself.

At the door, just before it was slammed shut behind me, I caught his final words.

"Lightning Bertie Strikes Again."

About the author:

Jan Bee Landman was born in Middelburg, the



Netherlands, on January 13, 1948, from a French/Scottish mother and a Dutch father. He studied English, became a teacher and translator, wrote many short stories and retired from the big city to the countryside in 1997 to

devote himself mainly to his three horses and to research and write a historical novel. In 2009 he resumed writing imaginative fiction.