

LONDON, MY LIFE! or THE SEDENTARY JEW

Michael Moorcock

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“I think it was good to be away from London for a while, both to taste the south western air and to see home from a distance. I doubt if I’ll ever use up my London history, as it were. *Mother London, King of the City* and the short stories, including Jerry Cornelius of course, still haven’t used a fraction of what I can draw on autobiographically, while my flying visits to London help me keep up with what’s going on and the changes that are happening. My new Jerry Cornelius novel, *Modem Times*, is set in London, though it’s mainly retrospective. I think I’ve got quite a few London stories in me—which I can intersperse with Paris stories, too!

“I’ve always liked the idea of the Wandering Jew since I first came across Eugène Sue’s story (*Le Juif Errant*, 1844-45). And people of Jewish origin frequently identify with the ideas of the wanderer—and of the diaspora. I’ve always liked the idea, too, of a guy doomed to remain in sedentary comfort for eternity—maybe the other side of the Jewish character. So, wanting to do a book which was also a sort of mythological history of London, the combination seemed ideal.”

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CHAPTER ONE

I am Cursed

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FOR MY SINS I have been married about two hundred times and to some very nice women. With others, it didn’t turn out so good. But believe me eternal life hasn’t been as hard as a lot of writers like to pretend. Generally, I’d say the first four or five centuries are the worst, because you keep expecting things to change and of course they don’t. You have to appreciate the pleasures of repetition. I mean, if we didn’t enjoy repetition, we wouldn’t like music, would we? Living forever has certain advantages, but you have to get into the right rhythm. So yes it was the first few hundred years which were hardest, when I made the mistake of falling in love and then let boredom get the better of me.

After some two thousand years, you might suspect I’d seen it all, but you never have seen it all, believe me. After a while, you start appreciating

the details. The little differences. Sometimes the big differences, too. Plumbing, for instance, and rapid transport. As we went into the renaissance, the enlightenment, the industrial revolution, things really did improve. What's more, women became prettier and smarter. Don't get me wrong, there were always smart women, but gradually large numbers of them became confident. This meant a steady overall improvement in relationships for me. My present wife is a theoretical physicist and her favourite feminist is Andrea Dworkin. She's read Proust four times in French and a couple of times in English. She knows all about my situation and is fascinated by it. It's a happy marriage. No children. I stopped having them a while ago, as soon as it became safe. In fact, if it wasn't for my unforgettable desire for one particular woman, things would be perfect now.

Yes, that is a problem. I've been in love with the same person for about fifteen hundred years and it never gets any better, but I'll tell you about that when the time comes. Would I have liked to have seen more of the world? Probably. But it's not my reason for wanting to travel. That, too, I'll tell you about. For now, let's just say I'm settled, if not totally content.

Not that I always feel so reconciled. I'm not as rich as you'd think I could be. I've lost as many fortunes as I've made. I've had my feckless moments, that I'm not particularly proud of. Luckily, because I was rarely of an Orthodox disposition, I also had plenty of guiltless fun. When you're being punished for eternity under the weight of a serious (and basically unjust) curse laid on you, you've already paid a high price, so what's to feel guilty? To say I've paid my debt to Jesus is to put it mildly. Not that it was actually Jesus who laid the curse on me in the first place. I hold no grudges, believe me. God was just paying back a debt to this guy, Joseph of Arimathea, who turned up in the settlement of Londinium with his spear and his cup and his followers. Admittedly, I could have been nicer to him, but frankly I found his claims a bit thin.

In those days the Romans were in charge of Britain as well as Palestine where I'd been born. You might not know much, but you'll have heard of the Roman Empire and doubtless, since you're actually able to read, you have a rough idea of the dates. By then I'd settled in the far West, near what's modern Tunis, and was a Carthaginian trader, practising my calling with reasonable success. I was planning a Mediterranean winter at home on the profits of our voyage, when this boat came beating up the Thames, striped sail swelling in the rainy wind, and deposited a bunch of sorry-looking men and women east of the wooden bridge, where most travellers came ashore. They clearly weren't used to the weather.

I was holding the fort, finishing off some business and waiting for my

own ship to return from a side trip to Market Zion, Cornwall, to offload some woad and pick up some tin. Although the Romans were already building a city to rival the Empire's capital, with a huge forum, temples, law courts and villas, that bridge over to Southwark, along with a growing system of straight roads, they didn't really get down to the western end of the island much and were perfectly agreeable to us doing what trading we could with our traditional contacts, mostly hard-working tin-miners who wanted our various dyes and cotton, especially since we always gave them a decent deal on the tin.

When Joseph and his entourage came ashore on what in those days was already a very presentable wharf they looked as if they'd had a rough time of it. They were clearly from the same part of the world as me. They wore some nice quality robes—tight weaving, well co-ordinated colours, wool or cotton or a mixture of both. Gold bracelets and chains, rings with precious stones, nice silver circlets holding their hoods on. Their travelling chests also showed that they weren't peasants. Solid cedar, big brass fittings, names on the sides in Hebrew. Worth a bit, as I said to Joseph, recommending the safest inn. He'd heard that the settlement was as crime free as far as anywhere on the island was crime free at that time. Big Roman presence. They were a thieving, sweet-talking lot those Brits, and weren't above murdering you in your bed if they could get away with it. London was a new town then, based on a place called Lud's Dun, after one of their gods supposed to inhabit the hill above the river. Not much of a hill, really. But the Roman engineers had fortified it, given it some pretty good amenities and settled a bunch of their legionnaires there. It wasn't bad farming land, thanks to the Thames's tendency to flood. It would be a while before anyone started building serious artificial banks to improve the navigation and save the somewhat vulnerable real estate as it improved in value.

"You're a long way from home," I said, once I'd established they spoke Hebrew, "what brings you to this Godforsaken neck of the woods?"

"We're on a mission," confided the woman who introduced herself as the bearded oldster's wife (she couldn't have been more than twenty-five). "We're from Jerusalem. You know, where He was crucified and rose from the dead."

Nutters, I thought. Not many people now know that in Europe and North Africa Britain was considered to be the America of its day. The Far West, the frontier of the Empire, where you were free to make something of yourself. Anyone who'd been persecuted for their religion (and frankly there were a lot fewer persecutions at that time, the Romans being by and

large a practical lot, as are most pantheists) tended to set off for Albion with plans to found a colony. The Romans had trouble getting anyone else to settle there and it was part of their usual method to encourage trade and industry wherever they could. You needed people to secure an Empire. Of course, there was the usual official Temple of the Imperial Cult and a temple to Diana on part of Ludgate Hill, but other religions were encouraged, because every able-bodied man could be called up for the army, if necessary. They needed people to help build roads. People to tax. The native Britons by and large weren't strong on that sort of forward-looking work, still being excited about farming, especially growing corn, which they were pretty good at. It hadn't taken most of them long to see the advantages of accepting the Romans, though I understood there were still a few tribes up north who were more warlike and regarded us Mediterranean types as interlopers, but this was more to do with propaganda being fed them by their rulers. Once they saw the reality, they tended to come in out of the cold and their rulers had no choice but to comply, if they wanted to have people they could still rule, at least nominally.

I understood a corn king myth when I heard it, even though I wasn't used to one being attached to the Greek and Jewish derived beliefs then prevalent in Palestine. So I accepted that the wrapped vessel Joseph carried was seed and that he would use his ceremonial hoe (the long thing all bound up in red cloth) to plant the first year's barley or whatever it was and get his little group started. There was plenty of room in those days, especially over near the East Coast where few local tribes had established towns on account of the awful climate. But Joseph of Arimathea, as it turned out, was more interested in heading west. I advised him to keep the ship handy and wait until my friends got back, since they would be returning up the coast any day now. He seemed grateful for my recommendation and suggested that on the following Saturday (his Sabbath) I join them in prayer and so forth, but I politely told him that Moloch, with all his faults, was good enough for me, along with the variety of household gods I carried in my purse or had stuck up on a little shelf in my digs, only a short distance from the inn. I wasn't deeply religious, still aren't, but, in common with most of the people I knew and did business with, thought it best to stay on the safe side. Joseph, however, was distinctly dependent, one of those old-fashioned Jews you still ran across in Palestine where religion was enjoying a revival, as so frequently happens amongst conquered peoples who can't raise much in the way of an army. I've seen it happen a thousand times. He started preaching at me, in the way they do, and I nodded and smiled and said I'd think about it but that Saturday was my busiest period, when all the Brits came in from the outlying farms to sell their cereals and livestock.

And that would have been it if Jessie, the afore-mentioned young wife, hadn't taken a fancy to me and asked me out of Joseph's hearing if there was a chance I might change my mind, in which case where would she be able to find me.

I don't know if you're familiar with the appearance of the average lantern-jawed British lady of the period, but let's just say they weren't my type whereas Jessie, all dark, smouldering eyes and black curly hair, was. I told her where I was staying. A house we had built, because we came and went so frequently, which was looked after by a displaced German, an ex-legionnaire and a reliable bloke whom we paid well. You could see it from the inn, because it was built above the flood zone, had two substantial storeys and a tiled roof of the Roman type. A lot of people actually thought it was a Roman's house and we were pretty proud of it, though it had no central heating and could get horribly smoky in winter, it didn't smell much since the privy was served by a pipe going directly into a small river they called the Flid and would become, of course, the Fleet.

I wasn't surprised, after I'd been in bed for about half-an-hour and the German was snoring his head off downstairs, to hear a tap on the door. Against my better instincts I threw on an old bit of toga and padded down to inch it open. It was her, sure enough. I checked what I could of the outside and let her in. "I've left him," she said. "I'm sick and tired of his raving on about this bloody cup and this bloody spear." She had brought them with her. I hadn't expected an actual runaway, just a quick roll on my palliasse until dawn, when I thought they'd be back on their boat and heading for Cornwall and Market Zion.

"No, love," I said. "I'm not helping you pinch his worldly goods, especially since he means to start a farm with them. We have Roman law here. I know what value these farmers place on that stuff."

"He's not a farmer," she said. "He's barmy. He's a Jesusite. He's brought a bit of the cross as well, but I couldn't see much use for that. He's awaiting what he calls the Rapture, due a hundred years after his prophet's death, and he wants to found a religious colony so he can be ready for the prophet when he turns up again. He married me under completely false pretences shortly after he left Arimathea. Described himself as a wine merchant. All for my dowry. He was on his uppers. Honest, I'm not loose. I just want to get back home to Palestine. I'm not totally sure he doesn't plan to kill me. Human sacrifices and so on. Some of those loonies have already crucified themselves in what they call 'Imitation of the Kristus'. I can see you're surprised, but, yes, they're Greeks, or as good as."

“Greeks are generally so rational!” I was shocked. Then I shrugged. “Well, he’ll get on all right in Cornwall if he plans a few human sacrifices. They all do it down there, especially when the harvest’s been poor. So what’s this, some sort of Sun god?”

“He’s a Jesusite, I told you.”

That was actually the first I’d heard of the Christians, though apparently they were already making enough trouble in Palestine and nearby places for the Romans to outlaw them. A lot had been rounded up. The Romans called them ‘donkeys’, which I gather was some sort of obscure pun. That was why Joseph of Arimathea and his little band had come here, so they could practise, as he said, without being persecuted. The hoe wasn’t a hoe, as you know, but a spear. It had religious significance. It was supposed to be the one which had pierced Jesus’s side on the cross and still had his blood encrusted on it. The cup, which was a very expensive looking item of gold, encrusted with jewels, was the one in which, for some reason known best to themselves, they had caught his blood. Apparently they were only a shade away from human sacrifice and cannibalism, because they drank human blood in their ceremonies. I was now doubly glad I hadn’t accepted their invitation.

Anyway, the long and the short of it was that she’d had enough. She thought she was marrying a well-to-do bloke with a nice place in Arimathea. The house proved to be mortgaged to the hilt to pay scribes to turn out all his pamphlets, and before she knew it they were sailing across the Med into the Atlantic and beating up the Thames looking for a new Promised Land. He thought he was some sort of Moses. She had been seasick all the way. She thought she could buy my protection with the stolen gear. She had plenty of heavy currency as far as I was concerned. I was soft, I know, but I felt sorry for her. “Take the stuff back, love,” I said, “and I’ll look after you. Then we can go back to Palestine together and you can decide what you want to do there.”

“You’re Jewish, are you?” she said. “You don’t look Jewish.”

“I’ve lived in Carthage most of my adult life. My mum and dad died in a riot and my brother took me there. It’s pretty peaceful now. Mostly modern, of course.”

She liked the sound of Carthage and I liked the feel of her buxom, soft and definitely sensuous body. She said she’d get the spear and the cup back in the morning. He’d never know they’d gone. Meanwhile, we went

to bed.

I was weak, I know it. I should have insisted on her returning the gear first, but my libido was already taking charge and I wasn't the first to find myself doing something very foolish because the pink lodestone couldn't help pointing north and dragging me with it. She was a very passionate young lady who hadn't experienced much fun with old Joseph. We had a lovely time. You'd think I wouldn't remember after some 2,000 years, but I do. Anyway, Jessie was special. She knew the whole Etruscan range, as we called it then. Very talented. I found it hard to believe that she had picked up everything from a middle-aged Jewish merchant, but she insisted she had. That and she had a vivid, creative imagination.

It won't surprise you to know that just after cock-crow, when we were warming up for a fresh arousal, the door downstairs banged open and I heard Gerald the German telling the intruders to bugger off or he'd call his Roman mates (of which he did have a lot) and send them all packing. I knew what was going on. I told Jessie to stay where she was and, putting on a robe, went downstairs where I found Gerald nose to nose with a bellowing Joseph of Arimathea and some of his nerdy followers, getting all het up about blasphemy and sacrilege and so forth.

"Look," I said, producing the spear and the cup. "I swear I was going to have her bring this back after breakfast. I promise you I haven't nicked it." Whereupon the lot of them, men and women both, piled into the house and knocked me to the ground. Which would have been all right except I was pretty convinced that they were then going to stomp me and I wasn't having that. I pulled the covering off the spear, used it to get to my feet while Gerald engaged them from behind. I poked the spear at them, hoping to scare them off. Which was a big mistake since one of Joseph's followers, an unblinking, red-faced loony if ever I saw one, lunged towards me and got the spear in his shoulder. "Sorry," I said. What else could you say. But it wasn't enough.

"He has desecrated our holy relics. He has defiled the instruments of the world's salvation." Joseph was in full priestly mode. And he didn't stop at my defiling. He got himself into a right old state. I wouldn't have taken him all that seriously if, through the door, I hadn't seen big black clouds boiling up on the other side of the river. I was never superstitious, but I had to admit I was feeling a bit creeped out.

"Look," I said, "have the thing. Have them both and bugger off back to your ship before Gerald's mates start turning up." I held the cup and the spear out to them and they backed away, making various signs with their

fingers. Then the spear started tingling in my hand. Then the cup began to do the same. A queer, itchy sort of feeling.

“Blasphemer, I condemn thee to live in this city for days without end until it shall cease to exist save as ash blowing across a barren wasteland and thou shalt never see thy homeland again!” roared Joseph, and raised his eyes to heaven.

I would have thought little more of this if a bolt of lightning hadn't suddenly zapped out of the sky, struck the tip of the spear, run up my arm and flung me against the far wall, dazed as I watched a somewhat smug Joseph collect up his goods and lead his followers out. After referring to Jessie as 'a Jezebel', which seemed a bit redundant, and saying 'I divorce thee' three times (evidently not above a bit of religious backsliding when it was convenient), Joseph led his followers back to the river. They returned to the ship and began rowing towards what is now Greenwich, the way they had come. I never saw him again. And at the time I couldn't even remember the substance of his curse, which I had to admit was pretty dramatic. He must have known there was a summer storm building. No plague of anything. No mysterious sickness. He had just been impressing his followers. I was glad to see the back of them.

Soon Jessie was stroking my forehead and helping me to a sip of nice Tuscan red while Gerald held the wineskin. “Let him keep his silly spear,” she said, snuggling against me, “and his stupid cup. After all, we have each other.”

That suited me. It was no more than I had expected in the first place. That afternoon she was if anything even more passionate. The lightning strike had done no serious damage. In fact I felt invigorated, full of energy. Jessie was very impressed (and secretly so was I). It would be a couple of weeks before I understood the snags.

Some years later, I heard Joseph of Arimathea had established his colony and made quite an impression on the locals. But I never had a chance to go down and see it for myself. I'd become a Londoner, whether I liked it or not.

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The novel is a work in progress and as yet has no publisher.

