

Extracts from 'S.J. Perelman - a life'
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Much as he disliked the Dutch colonials he encountered, Sid bought two things in Bangkok he would cherish all his life. The first was an English sports car, a natty black and red MG Tourer that he had shipped to London at the end of June so he could drive it on a tour of Denmark, Germany and Holland. "It was a handsome little vehicle, its red leather upholstery a rich contrast to the gleaming black body and smart canvas top, the high curving cowl flowing into the rakish cutaway doors, the dash sparkling with more mysterious gauges, meters, and indicators than a Wurlitzer organ," he wrote in *The Swiss Family Perelman*.

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After boarding Tong Cha with an old Parisian lady who owned a pet shop on the Left Bank, the Perelmans flew to England, where they picked up the new MG that had just arrived from Bangkok. ... On July 25, the Perelmans left London for Bath. The trip was not a pleasant one, as Sid and Laura both had trouble driving on the left-hand side of the road. Once, when Sid was tired, he inadvertently switched into the right-hand lane, narrowly missing an oncoming car. It gave them all a bad scare, and undoubtedly was a cruel reminder of West's fatal accident.

In Liverpool, Sid left the MG for a checkup. It would be the first of many, for he would own the car for thirty more years and when he died, it would still be in mint condition. As one friend put it, it was "his baby." He was always fussing with it, worrying about it like an anxious mother with a delicate infant. A symbol of his Anglophilia, it was the perfect car for a would-be British squire. It represented success, glamor and refinement, all the elegance and good taste he imagined existed among the aristocracy. It gave him the illusion of having made it in the Gentile world. Yet there was something obsessive too about the care he lavished on it during the long years that lay ahead.

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When Sid returned to Liverpool from Dublin, he found to his dismay that the garage had outfitted the MG with ugly bathtub-style grips. He quickly discarded them but they left holes in the dashboard. The family moved on to Chester and Oxford, where they visited the university, although Sid seemed more concerned about the damage to his car than about his tour of Brasenose and Magdalen colleges. He was vastly relieved when the dashboard and speedometer were replaced at a nearby MG factory.

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On September 29, the Perelmans, with Tong Cha and the MG, sailed on the *De Grasse* from Le Havre to New York. Although Sid had a good time with the Irwin Shaws and the Robert Standishes, who were also on board, he was eager to get home. In fact, he could not return soon enough.

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Every spring he would take Abby for a walk around the farm to show her the wildflowers. In the late 1950s, he, Mary Faulconer and Abby went to the Philadelphia Zoo, which he liked to visit every year. Sid was driving his MG with the top down, when a large piece of sheet metal flew off a passing scrap-iron truck. If Mary

Faulconer had not seen an ominous shadow out of the corner of her eye and yelled at Sid to swerve to the right, and if he had not been able to respond immediately, they would all have been decapitated. Abby was so frightened by the near-accident that she got down on the floor in the back of the car. According to Mary Faulconer, the only way Abby and Sid were able to calm down was to drive to Doylestown for chocolate sodas.

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But there were a few possessions that Sid refused to part with: a thousand books, which he put into storage; the oak swivel chair he sat on while writing; a horn-handled pen knife that had belonged to Nathanael West; and his vintage four-door MG, which he was thinking seriously about shipping to England. As he wrote Karl Fortress, "Somehow, the thought of driving it to Abingdon on Thames, where it came from, and asking the Morris Garage people to tune it up so I can use it for another 21 years appeals to me. What do you think?"

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On the weekend before he was to leave for London, Sid was a guest at the home of Betty Blue Moodie, a friend who lived in Bucks County. Mrs. Moodie recalls that Sid called her at the last minute from New York and said he wanted to come to Bucks County to take one last look at his MG, which he had decided not to ship to England but to put in storage in a garage in Erwinna

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On September 23, 1979, I was seated on a plane moving from Peking to Nanking. The man beside me was the shy, reserved, yet very bright English journalist who served as guide to our party of 10 in order to perfect his study of the countless dialects in the Chinese language.

As a rule, Simon spoke very little, and we travelers went so far as to find him properly inscrutable. Knowing this, I was surprised and very delighted to find him trying to "make conversation." His opening query was a wish for my impressions of Peking.

Then he asked if I knew anyone who had already made the Chinese trek. I said I did—that it was a New York friend who had attempted, the previous year, to drive a vintage car from Paris to Peking. Simon showed great excitement, and said, "Oh, you mean S. J. Perelman. Isn't it too bad that he died."

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Perelman also continued to see Leila Hadley, who by a curious twist of fact had since married the man who had bought Sid's farm in Erwinna.

"I met William Musham [her third husband, a business executive] at Derald Ruttenberg's sixtieth birthday party on February 16, 1976," she states, "and I was fascinated that he owned Sid Perelman's place in Bucks County. I married him on May 29, 1976. I had been up to that place several times before when Laura was alive, and I knew that Sid always kept his MG there, that car that was like another child.

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In March of 1978, at the casual suggestion of Martha Saxton and her husband, photographer Enrico Ferorelli, Sid began planning an extraordinarily difficult recreation of the famous 1907 Peking-to-Paris road race, in which Prince Borghese and four or five other motorists had participated. It was still considered one of the most grueling races of all time.

The original race had started in Peking in February and ended months later on the

cobbled streets of Paris. The route had taken the competing motorists through the Gobi Desert, Mongolia, Siberia, Russia, Poland and Germany. Many of the cars had to be taken apart in certain places and carried by coolies piece by piece across the great Yangtze gorges.

Sid planned to drive the natty black and red MG he had bought in Bangkok in 1949 from Paris to China, reversing the original route. He was seventy-four years old, and the car thirty years old, but both man and automobile were in reasonable health, trim and dapper and elegant. The car had only 19,300 miles on it and had been cared for by a superb mechanic in Erwinna. If he were successful, Sid told his friends, he would be the first foreign civilian ever to drive into China. "I tend to be numbered increasingly among the geriatrics," he said. "Perhaps this is why I'm striving to drive from Paris to Peking-one last chuck of the dice."

It would also be a chance to make a splash in the world press. As though he had finally despaired of making any more big money at writing, he seemed more and more frantic to attract attention by unique adventures, by feats of derring-do. Perhaps he thought it would help the sales of his books. Or perhaps he did it merely out of some vast nostalgia for the daring heroes he had read about as a boy. Whatever his motives, he had set himself an ordeal that made the Phileas Fogg venture pale by comparison.

Still he was game. When Harold Evans, who had commissioned the trip for the Sunday Times [of London], tried to talk him out of the Paris-to-Peking route, suggesting that Sid should retrace the Grand Tour popular with young English aristocrats in the 18th and 19th centuries, Sid replied that such a trip lacked excitement.

Since the MG was old and possibly subject to breakdowns, both men felt that Sid should not drive 'the car alone. Sid suggested that there be a back-up car to carry replacement parts for the MG, supplies and gas. But this time Evans disagreed, saying a back-up car would detract from the romance of the adventure. In the end he and Sid compromised. A small trailer was attached to the MG and loaded with supplies, including 100,000 Band-Aids and 30 boxes of Lomotil, which Sid insisted on taking in case of emergencies.

As traveling companions Sid would have his friend Eric Lister and Sid Beer, who was in charge of the Huntingdonshire MG Museum, which had agreed to furnish the necessary spare parts. .

Being Sid, he insisted on taking along a woman-Delta Willis, a tall, pretty blonde from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, who had been recommended by Martha Saxton. Perelman had always been partial to tall women, and Delta, the vice-president of a film company called Survival Anglia Ltd., loomed over six feet.

Miss Willis knew that part of her job was to be caricatured, and she was right. As soon as he hired her, Perelman told journalist Mary Blume, "In case I am pursued by brigands, I intend to throw portions of this lady to impede them as I hurtle on. His threat was never made good, for Delta Willis also wanted to write a book about the trip and she was dismissed before the adventure began.

Sid and his two male companions started the journey from the Arc de Triomphe on the Champs-Elysees on September 2, 1978. Sid was driving, but it was mainly for publicity purposes, for at age seventy-four, he no longer trusted himself behind the wheel. During the trip Eric Lister and Sid Beer shared nearly all the driving. For the next twenty-seven days, they drove through Central Europe, the Balkans, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The car performed well, but Perelman's

relationship with his traveling companions did not progress as smoothly.

Once they left Germany, the food and accommodations were miserable. All three men had to sleep in one room, which greatly annoyed Perelman, who felt that such arrangements were like being in the Boy Scouts. Once they reached Bombay, there was no decent land route, so they had to fly with the car to Hong Kong. Along the way it had been stripped of all its MG insignia by souvenir hunters. For the next six weeks Sid cooled his heels trying to get permission to enter China, while Lister and Beer returned to, London.

"It must be obvious to observers of human nature that a couple of curmudgeons like Sid and I [sic] placed in a cocktail shaker with a normally reserved English gentleman as the third ingredient would create a bitter potion when shaken for too long," Lister later wrote.

"... The tragedy that this trip created was the irreparable rift it caused between Sid and myself. The last time I saw him was in our suite at the Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong."

Finally Sid was granted a visa to enter China and was able to fly to Peking with Nancy Nash, a Hong Kong journalist and photographer. Two days after his arrival in Peking, however, he became ill with acute bronchitis and had to be hospitalized for five days in Peking's Capital Hospital. While he was there, the staff referred to him as "the famous foreign pen-driver."

The Chinese at last agreed to have the MG shipped to Peking. Sid, who was still feeling unwell and very disconsolate, decided to forego Peking altogether and have the MG shipped back to England by boat. He would fly back to Hong Kong and then return to London.

What he did not know was that there was a lorry strike in England, and the car could not be unloaded when it got to Southampton. Instead it was shipped to Hamburg, Germany. To complicate matters, when at last the MG reached the United States, it was sent to Baltimore, not Philadelphia as he had specified. Perelman blamed all these mishaps on Sidney Beer, who he felt had deliberately messed up the arrangements in retaliation for their disagreements on the road.

The last lap of this ill-fated journey cost Sid five hundred dollars more-when he had to have the car trucked from Baltimore to Pennsylvania, where his expert mechanic would get it back into running order.

For three and a half months after his return to America, Sid tried to write about his trip. But the dazzling wordplay, the clever bon mots for which he was so famous, would not come. He had gone around the world six times in his life, but this was the most unpleasant journey of all, a physical and mental fiasco from beginning to end. In the past he had somehow managed to find humor in hardship and tangled arrangements, but this time he found nothing funny in any aspect of his trek to the Far East. It was grotesque, obscene. "The car behaved like a dream, and my two companions like a nightmare," he told a friend.

Although he proposed to give Harold Evans eight pieces he had written for the New Yorker as a substitute for the humorous series he had promised the Sunday Times, it was the first time in his long career as a writer that he had failed to deliver a major piece. On September 4, 1979, he wrote Paul Theroux that "after a lot of bleeding cuticle, I decided to abandon it. I guess there are certain subjects - or maybe one's subjective reactions to them-that in spite of the most manful attempts, are totally unproductive."

That summer he gave up smoking. Some of his friends thought he had aged and seemed in fragile health. Others, like the Philip Hamburgers, with whom Sid and Ruth

Goetz had dinner two nights before he died, found him unaffected by the rigors of his frustrating journey and in cheerful spirits. His relationship with Prudence Crowther seemed to be giving him new life-yet several of his English friends were deeply concerned about him. The last time he had seen them in England, he confided that he had suffered a number 'of "little heart attacks." Still he accepted dinner invitations, dressed nattily, ate well-and admiring the New Yorker profile Kenneth Tynan had written about Louise Brooks,' the silent movie star, he planned to drive up to Rochester, New York, and see her in the fall-or whenever his MG was ready for travel.

On October 17, 1979, playwright Edward Chodorov, who was an old friend of Sid's, was planning to meet him for dinner. He phoned Sid that morning to confirm their dinner date. After ringing Sid's room at the hotel several times and receiving no answer, he asked the hotel manager to see if Sid was all right.

After Sid's death, a rumor circulated among many of his friends that he had died in flagrante delicto. "He would have loved the rumor," a ladyfriend says. But it was not true. He died alone, dressed in pajamas and a robe. The time of death was estimated at eleven-thirty A.M.

His death at age seventy-five had been caused by a massive heart attack, brought on by arteriosclerosis. It was the same disease that had killed his mother. Like him, Sophie had died in autumn, on October 16, just one day before the date of his death.

As a dabbler in the occult, Sid might have noticed that October 17th was a peculiarly significant date in his life. It was the day Around the World in 80 Days had opened many years before to such fanfare. October 17th was also the birthday of a man who even though he had been dead for thirty-nine years still cast a mysterious shadow across his life-Nathanael West.

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After his death ... Sid's MG was sold by the Vintage Car Store of Nyack, New York, to Thomas W. Barrett III of Scottsdale, Arizona, for \$10,000.

Compiled by Mike Silk, UK.