



But madam, I am pausing only momentarily on my way to China. . . . Mr. S. J. Perelman, hero of one literary circumnavigation, survived his encounter with a Mayfair warden and headed Dover-wards for Paris and Peking

## Perelman: only 10,000 miles to go

Roy Perrott reports from Paris on the three men in an MG who are bound for Peking

THE GREAT Paris-to-Peking expedition, otherwise known as Three Men in an MG, got away to a smooth start from the Arc de Triomphe yesterday with S. J. Perelman, the noted humourist and traveller, comfortably at the wheel of his veteran car.

With an estimated 10,000 miles still to go, Perelman's sporty-looking, canvas-topped tourer (a 1949 model but still going strong) managed to take a wrong turning off the Champs Elysées on a too westerly compass course. However, showing the same dexterity with the wheel that he shows with words, the nimble driver soon swung back eastwards. "As the French essay, it was a retreat in order to leap forward the better," explained Perelman in a farewell message, watched by a concourse of curious French pedestrians.

The avowed aim of this oddly gallant expedition is to commemorate a half-forgotten event, the Peking-to-Paris road race of 1907 when nine pioneer motorists took up the challenge of a French newspaper and hurtled across Europe and Asia in a duel with time and hardship. One of their number arrived home with one replacement wheel carved from wood in Tibet.

At 74, Perelman has every excuse for sticking to a rocking chair. But as a writer, he ex-

plains, he still needs to be bruised by experience. He can hardly fail to get the right abrasions on a route that will take him and two companions via Vienna, Istanbul, New Delhi and then by way of either the Himalayas or Singapore to the end of the oriental rainbow.

If they can gain permission to motor into China, where foreign drivers are not allowed, it could be a significant diplomatic advance.

Like all the best journeys from the Odyssey onwards, the trip clearly has elements of uncertainty. Joining the trio in their tightly cramped vehicle for the London-to-Paris warm-up stretch, I was impressed by their nonchalance. The windscreen wiper went phut in a heavy shower on the Dover Road. But Perelman was hardened long ago by years of scriptwriting for the Marx Brothers. A look of blank anxiety appears behind his gold-rimmed spectacles only when things seem to be going right for too long.

Cruising on at a steady 50 miles an hour, which is about the best the veteran model can do unless pushed hard, the team continued to reflect on Perelman's navigational strategy that it might be necessary to slow down to miss the tail-end of the Indian monsoon season.

However the expedition has some solid experience beneath its lighthearted surface. The

second member of the team, Sidney Beer, is an expert on old MG cars and how to fix them; Eric Lister, a London art gallery director also knows his engines and the hazards of far-flung road travel.

"Months of dedicated planning are behind us," claimed Perelman. We recalled that he had packed and repacked his two suitcases many times to get the kit absolutely right, but admitted that he still ended up like the rest of us with the last few bits and pieces in a supermarket plastic bag.

While the trio are clearly depending on their unquenchable spirit rather than any heavy or expensive logistic support, they clearly have a few groceries behind them, as Groucho might say. In the tiny trailer behind

the MG are packed mosquito nets, sleeping bags and sun hats as well as iron rations. Also oilskins—"For wear inside the car," Perelman stresses, the canvas side flaps being suspect in anything above a heavy shower.

Indeed in a light breeze the resonant flapping noise they make can beguile the passenger into the sensation of rounding the Horn in a square-rigger. The team agreed that the absence of colourful noise had made modern motoring by comparison somewhat drab.

"Sheer music," said Perelman, hoisting the collar of his bush jacket defensively against the wind.

Perelman and company will recount their adventures in The Sunday Times in due course.