

The Illustrated LONDON NEWS

Into the Eighties: Forecast for the coming Decade—January issue

It was a magnificent journey in 1907 when an Italian drove one of those new-fangled, or at least recently-fangled motorcars from Peking to Paris, 10,000 miles. It was still quite a trip when S J Perelman the American humorist and traveller set out from Paris for Peking in 1978. Here is Perelman's version of how he talked The Sunday Times into backing him for what became, sadly but triumphantly, his last trip and...



TIME WARP AT THE ROUND TABLE

The Algonquin's literary lions of the Twenties didn't look old enough for 50 years to have passed. Could they really be (clockwise from left) Dorothy Parker, Benchley, Woolcott, Brown, Connolly, Adams, Edna Ferber, Kaufman and Sherwood? Perelman (far right) explains to pipe-smoking Jevons

PERELMAN'S LAST PIECE

"WELL, speak up, Jevons," I challenged him. "Are you ready to eat your words? When I told you that the Algonquin Round Table, the most renowned coterie of wits since the Mermaid Tavern's, had never disbanded—that it was in fact conspiring right here more brilliantly than ever—you hooted in scorn, derided me. Do I see a bit of egg on your face now, pappy?" The bewildered gaze my luncheon guest turned on me was apology enough. "You've convinced me, all right. I'm absolutely speechless—dumbfounded." And when Hannibal Jevons is dumbfounded that is news indeed, for little under Heaven surprises the editor-in-chief of Britain's most prestigious weekend journal, The Sunday Chimes, a man of dynamic intellect, equally famed for his ability to be in three places at once or none at all. At the moment, he and I were seated in a booth of the Hotel Algonquin's famed Red Room, where the mere hint that somebody is nobody guarantees one a welcome like scarlatina. And a scant 30 feet distant at the historic Round Table, the nine jesters who had immortalised it and who comprised the Supreme Court of Waggers were in session—George S. Kaufman, Frank P. Adams, Alexander Woolcott, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, Edna Ferber, Heywood Brown, Marc Connelly, and Robert Sherwood. Though too far away to catch their persiflage, we could tell from the hurricane of chuckles that the week's galore of wit, puns, quips, epigrams, bantered, rapier-like witticisms exchanged, and funnybones tickled. More fortunate than ourselves, were the diners within earshot; convulsed with laughter, they slapped their chests ecstatically and nudged each other's ribs—the Algonquin's ribs are second to none, even if nudging them oft-times creates greasy fingers. As was only proper, the tables nearest the galaxy held Gotham's elite—the society leaders, couturiers, decorators, fashionable hairdressers and astrologers, museum directors, and various other gimbaljawed fruits feverishly memorising the quips in order to repeat them in their own rookeries. The hoydenish tomboy intimacy, punctuated by the eldritch screams of overworked women and the cries of "Gee! Pucci!" "Cartier!", gave ample proof, were any needed, that this was where it all happens, man. "But see here," said Jevons suddenly, his analytical, restless, newshawk mind grappling with the obvious paradox. "Since all these noted playwrights, columnists, and critics were already middle-aged back in the Twenties, how come they look exactly the same now, half a century later? They must be well over a hundred!" "Exactly. Yet can you believe that not a single one of our media—the press, television, radio—has ever bothered to dig into that enigma?" "Until this moment, my friend!" A boss journalist to his fingertips, Jevons was already connecting headlines. "I'm going to assign an investigative team to this—maybe two investigative teams... But listen!" he burst forth, nearly carried by the force of his inspiration. "Why don't you do it for us?" I permitted myself a quiet smile. "I already have." "You mean you've written it?" He half-rose from his chair. "I'll print it in banner type across the front page! I'll pay you fifty thousand..." "One second, Hannibal. slow down," I admonished. "Nobody's

going to publish this. But I can reveal a highlight or two. Suppose I intimated that the nine characters at that table were—well, not altogether legit." "What? Are you implying that the George S. Kaufman yonder is a fake—the one Woolcott we see here is not all pout and a yard wide?" "Pray hear me out," I besought him. "When Frank Case, the original proprietor of this hotel, sold it, he and the new owners agreed that the Round Table was too cashworthy a legend to die on the vine. Accordingly, a certain meeting took place in the offices of the Theater Guild, the content of which may never be known. I paused to allow Jevons time to sponge away the tiny bead of sweat obscuring his forehead. "Would it interest you to learn that on a remote New Jersey chicken farm there is an actor's workshop all of whose members strikingly resemble those of the original Algonquin Round Table?" "Oh, I'm sorry—I was distracted. Ewe Dunaway just walked in, or am I mistaken? Isn't that Faye Dunaway?" "No, it's Cesar Romero. Not as I was saying—from that nexus, that talent pool in New Jersey, are drawn the mummies you see at that table—duplicates of the pioneer merry-andrews so similar that if they venture into a saloon frequented by the original nine, his barman invariably drops dead of shock. Perhaps 'invariably' is incorrect, since nobody can drop dead over and over." "Staggering," declared Jevons. "This is certainly the Great Impersonation, but on a scale which that great fabulist E. Phillips Openheim never dared imagine. Tell me, though," he said, perplexedly scratching his wee beard, "even if these jesters don't age, what about their material? Is there conceivably hidden away on the premises a staff of writers refurbishing their dialogue, updating their jokes for modern cars?" "Don't be an Alredale," I said. "Why go to the expense

when the audience here is mainly foreign—French rock stars, Italian highbinders hustling porno flicks, salesmen for Japanese bedroom novelties? No, the same old chestnuts are still in service. At this moment, if my lip-reading is accurate, Kaufman is observing that one man's Mede is another's Persian, and Dorothy Parker, declining Edna Ferber's acid invitation to precede her, namely, 'Age before beauty,' is retorting 'Pearls before swine.'" "Then this whole grisly bizarrade, this animated Madame Tussaud's, is cranked out daily for the clientele and nobody's ever tumbled?" he asked. "How did you cotton to the truth?" "Well, through Robert Benchley, actually. Tongue loosened by the grape he once confided that as he was weaving back to his chambers one morning, he ran into his double. The man, freshly shaven and bowler-hatted, was on his way to perform at the Round Table. Recovering from his momentary stupefaction, Benchley dragged his Doppelgänger into a soda fountain and wormed a confession from him." "The three enlargements Jevons withdrew from the folder I handed him portrayed a smart little English sports car of a bygone era with a canvas top, cut-down doors, fold-flat windscreen, and side curtains, instantly familiar to cognoscenti as an MG Tourer of the '30' type. The body was black, the upholstery of red leather, and in the unprejudiced opinion of everyone who had ever laid eyes on it, it was as cute as a bug's ear. I proceeded to relate its history, a strange mixture of exoticism and financial shrewdness, my companion was visibly transfixed. Back in the year 1949, Fate had set me and my family down in Bangkok, of all places, suffering from a weird virus—a delusion of mine that we were going to spend a trial year living there. It took about five weeks and several thousand mosquito bites to knock the malady to subside. In the meantime, by a coincidence, the British pound sterling was also ailing. On its recovery we found that it had devalued fifty per cent, and every auto showroom in Bangkok was filled with the most eye-catching bargains. The one that caught and ravished mine was this MG Tourer. And it was the insignificant side-curtains that did the trick. "Forgive me, but I don't follow," Jevons interrupted. "You bought the car because of the side-curtains?" "Inglais, man," I chortled. "And do you know what itsinglass itself consisted of? Gelatin from the air bladders of Russian sturgeon." Hannibal Jevons regarded me fixedly. "I have the feeling I'm in a dream. But notwithstanding, continue your narrative. What happened to you?" "Brother!" I exulted. "Do I have to spell it out for you? Only the most spectacular European tour anyone ever made. The family and I drove all over England, France, Belgium, Holland and Denmark in this vehicle, viewing their matchless scenery through the air bladders of Russian sturgeon." "A cultural experience, I take it, that you've never recovered from?" "Right. And what I'm now proposing is that The Sunday Chimes back me in a similar but more ambitious junket. The car, as you can see from these recent pictures, has hardly aged in twenty-nine years. It's racked up only 19,000 miles." "That is extraordinarily. Where do you, exactly, drive?" "Well, I really should, but their vaults are too small to drive into. So I keep it in an empty store in Philadelphia—a bankrupt delicatessen." Jevons nodded sympathetically, an ideal answer for me and the car, with a soupçon of adventure. However, this current ambitious tour you're proposing. What are its dimensions? Continental? Hemispheric? Global?" "I haven't worked it out, to tell the truth. Just some kind of extended jaunt abroad for me and the car, with a soupçon of adventure, perhaps." "Like crossing the Sahara? Or driving from the Cape to Cairo?" "Well," I hesitated, "the trip I visualised would be a leisurely ramble around Europe, say, visiting different spas and watering-places, their great hotels and casinos—soaking up the colour, the nostalgia of the Belle Epoque—and then writing about it in a breathless, Beverly Nichols style.

Does that send a shiver up your spine?" I asked eagerly. "No, my gorge," he replied, "but I've put aside the actual route for the moment. I'm confident the automobile can withstand the trip, but bow about your qualifications? Other than steering the car, do you know anything at all about what goes on under the bonnet?" "Of course not," I said. "Furthermore, the mere sight of an internal combustion engine fills me with yawns. In the fifty years I've owned an automobile, I have yet to change a tyre." "You know," Jevons said thoughtfully, "I hate to sound like a fuss-budget, but don't you think you ought to take along a mechanic?" "A mechanic on a trip like this? Some grease monkey in filthy overalls?" "Well, then, take one of the opposite gender—a sturdy young female who in addition to her knowledge of carburetors could also take shorthand, cook, sew,

and fell trees in case any should block your path while driving." "Look, Hannibal," I said, with just a shade of impatience. "I appreciate your solicitude, but honest, the last thing I need is some vain, empty-headed wench nattering at me—" "Now you listen to me, Mr Headstrong," he said sternly. "If The Sunday Chimes is to have a financial stake in this affair, your welfare is of paramount importance. It's painstaking-plain and crystal-clear that you're barely able to lace your own shoes, let alone behave on a generally adult level. I must therefore insist that unless you are prepared to take along a beautiful blonde female mechanic approximately six feet two inches tall and superbly formed; to keep your motor ticking over, the project is off." "What could I do? My hands were tied and the man was leveling a pistol at my temple. All the sleepless nights I had spent



PERELMAN PREPARED, WITH MG

THIS is the car—here in London with its intrepid owner—in which S. J. Perelman set out from Paris for Peking; his MG tourer bought new in 1949 and treasured ever since. It had a soft top; moreover and very importantly for Perelman it had (or so he was convinced) windows made out of the rarer portions of Russian sturgeon. The plan was to take the route, by sea, from the intercontinental car race from Peking to Paris, but Perelman, ever original, wanted to cover the route backwards; or more precisely, in reverse order though not in reverse—to France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, India, Burma, and then by boat to Hong Kong and on into China to Canton and Peking. The little car was filled with Perelman and two experts on old MGs, a trailer was fitted with spare parts for the car and spare food for the expedition. They survived floods and food poisoning; the car survived several operations en route. ... and then they drove to China

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BIG REDUCTIONS AT ALL BRANCHES



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