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# Number Seventeen

Great Britain, 1932

Director: Alfred Hitchcock

Cert—U. dist—BFI. p.c—British International Pictures. exec. p—John Maxwell. p—Leon M. Lion. asst. d—Frank Mills. sc—Alma Reville, Alfred Hitchcock, Rodney Ackland. Based on the play by J. Jefferson Farjeon. ph—John J. Cox, Bryan Langley. ed—A. C. Hammond. a.d—Wilfred Arnold. m—A. Hallis. sd—A. D. Valentine. l.p—Leon M. Lion (Ben), Anne Grey ('Deaf and Dumb' Woman), John Stuart (Detective

Barton), Garry Marsh (Sheldrake), Ann Casson (Miss Ackroyd), Barr Jones (Thief), Donald Calthrop, Henry Caine. 2,126 ft. 59 mins. Original running time—64 mins. (16 mm.).

Tracking down a group of jewel thieves, a detective enters No. 17, an empty house in a London neighbourhood located next to railway tracks, where he encounters Ben, a Cockney tramp, and the apparently dead body of a man at the head of the stairs. Miss Ackroyd, from No. 19, the adjoining house, enters through the skylight in search of her father, who went out after receiving a telegram

which reveals that he has traced Suffolk necklace to Sheldrake. Barton; the body has meanwhile disappeared. Two men and an apparently deaf and dumb woman arrive; one of them holds the detective at gunpoint. Miss Ackroyd at gunpoint. Locked in the bathroom, Ben is attacked from behind and knocked out. When he recovers he observes Sheldrake, the leader of the thieves who has been hiding there, removing a diamond necklace from behind the cistern; Ben picks it from his pocket. Mr. Ackroyd (who had earlier entered the house, been knocked out by Sheldrake and his body subsequently found by Ben and the detective) reappears and is initially assumed to be Sheldrake by the two other thieves. A fight between the real Sheldrake and Ackroyd ensues, and the latter is knocked unconscious again. The detective and Miss Ackroyd are bound to the bannisters while the gang prepares to flee; the deaf and dumb woman (who proves to be anything but) tells them she has decided to leave the gang. Breaking free, the detective leaves Miss Ackroyd with her father while he and Ben pursue the gang to a train bound for a ferry to the Continent. Ben boards the train and the detective tracks a coach and continues after them. A fight breaks out among the thieves when Sheldrake discovers that he no longer has the necklace; one of them learns that Ben has it and subsequently pretends to be the famous detective Barton in an attempt to retrieve it. Sheldrake and the other thief are spotted by the engine fireman, whom they shoot, along with the driver. The train collides with a ferry boat and the gang is captured. The detective reveals to the deaf and dumb woman that he is Barton.

"Well, come on. What about it?" "What about what?" This emblematic exchange, along with the opening shot—the camera tracking with the wind past a ruffled tree to pursue a rolling hat, which is pursued in turn by a man who stops to retrieve it in front of an abandoned house—helps to establish *Number Seventeen* as a compulsive flow of interlocking pieces and events, a kind of delirium of continuity that Hitchcock imposes on a rather humdrum mystery plot. The last film that he directed for British Lion at Elstree Studios, it is not one of his personal favourites; in his interviews with Bogdanovich and Truffaut, he terms it "another stage play that they'd bought . . . [which] didn't transfer" and "A disaster!" respectively. Understandable verdicts, under the circumstances: yet the peculiar interest and excitement of this slim featurette today largely derives from the apparent impatience Hitchcock felt with his material. Hurling through the complicated plot at so rapid a pace that irrelevancies, gaps in logic, revelations and successive developments all seem to have an equal part in the diagnosis, Hitchcock abstracts this tale of slippery identities into a giddy racing exercise, with momentum and surprise often taking precedence over rhyme or reason. A jewel thief makes a threatening gesture, then gratuitously sneezes; Hitchcock abruptly cuts to shadows on a wall, and elsewhere replays an idea from *Murder* by inserting a barrage of brief and consecutive close-ups; a woman introduced as deaf and dumb begins to speak, with no explanation given for either the deception or her abandonment of it. Working close to the edge of incoherence most of the way—an impression undoubtedly reinforced by the absence of five minutes in the print under review—*Number Seventeen* occasionally suggests a counterpart to Renoir's *La Nuit du Carrefour* in its obscure network of nocturnal grapplings and multiple character reversals. Leon M. Lion, the producer and star, seems as much a liability as an asset to the proceedings because Hitchcock never appears to know quite how to integrate the actor's stagey Cockney turns into the surrounding confusion; but there is one elegant moment—Ben peeping ostentatiously at Sheldrake in the lavatory—when actor and director are clearly working together, and one is reminded of a caricaturist side of Hitchcock which links him with Eisenstein. Although the movie seems to be remembered today chiefly for its concluding chase of model bus after model train, before the latter crashes into a model ferry—a sequence which Claude Chabrol and Raymond Durnat have each aptly compared to Jiri Trnka's puppet films—it is worth noting that Hitchcock handles the entire film like a mechanical toy, a top to be kept spinning at all costs. Only when the mechanism begins to run down, when the belated denouements and identifications begin to come to the fore and plot assumes a more conventional lucidity, does it become apparent how much the film's execution has concealed a very pedestrian thriller framework.

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM