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## NUMBER SEVENTEEN

*Britain-1932*      *65 minutes*      *B/W*      *Rental: \$30.00*  
*Sale: \$300.00*

Directed, screenplay by Alfred Hitchcock, from the play and the novel by Jefferson Farjeon - Cinematography by Jack Cox - Produced by John Maxwell - British International Pictures. Players: *Leon M. Lion, Anne Grey, John Stuart, Donald Calthrop, Barry Jones, Garry Marsh.*

The diptych structure of this early sound thriller neatly demonstrates Hitchcock's turn away from the conventional whodunit toward the episodic, comic chase form which was to establish his reputation as "the Master of Suspense."

The first shots take us with impressive camera movements into an old dark house, where our hero (John Stuart) encounters a rascal old tramp (Leon M. Lion), a handcuffed corpse, and the corpse's daughter (Anne Grey). Lion, a Cockney music hall performer who starred in the stage version of the story, seems quite intent on dominating the proceedings, and Hitchcock seems equally intent on distracting us with a bewildering array of Gothic effects and likely suspects. Much of the action is set on a central winding staircase, enabling Hitchcock to cast ominous cobweb shadows over his characters (as in *Suspicion*) and to involve us in some vertiginous montage sequences. When the staircase collapses (perhaps it was being held together by the narrative thread), our hero and heroine are left hanging on a railing where the crooks had tied them — a witty anticipation of the intimate bondage in *The 39 Steps* and other Hitchcock films.

All of the energy pent up in the convoluted conventions of the whodunit form is released in the second part of the film: a wild race across the English countryside between a freight train and an abducted tour bus that climaxes with the locomotive, tender, and car after car smashing onto a cross-channel ferry. Hitchcock gives the screw of suspense a final turn as we watch a railway car sinking with one of the hero's allies handcuffed inside. Raymond Durnat has called this climax "one of the most sustained, varied and exhilarating disasters in movies," and Hitchcock's achievement is all the more remarkable when we consider that his low budget obliged him to make extensive use of miniature models for his effects.

Finally, though characterization is hardly the movie's greatest asset, it is interesting to note how the central figure of the detective develops in ways similar to other Hitchcock heroes. He begins as a rather stodgy moralist who lectures the old tramp, "It always pays an innocent man to play it straight, you know." Like Richard Hannay in *The 39 Steps* and Roger Thornhill in *North by Northwest*, he is soon thrust into a morally dizzy position where such conventional sentiments are useless. In pursuit of the villains, he audaciously pulls a pistol to hijack a Green Line tour bus — much to the delight of Hitchcock, who comically emphasizes the reactions of the passengers and the advertisements "See the countryside by Green Line" and "Stop here for dainty teas" as the bus hurtles recklessly along. Like the director and the film itself, the detective seems liberated and energized by his emergence from that old dark house.

— Terry Andrews