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## No. 17

After *Rich and Strange*, which was neither a critical nor a commercial success, Hitchcock was perhaps under productorial and other pressures, and has since accused himself of a certain lack of discipline in response to a subject confronted with which he might well have felt his heart sink a little. None the less, he makes a very free adaptation of an ingratiating comedy-thriller by J. Jefferson Farjeon, although little but the title, a tramp and the idea of continent-bound trains passing a deserted house and being handy for smuggling links

*No. 17* with its original. The novel, by now, is an amiable curio about a comic Cockney tramp who's frightened of his own shadow and wheezes obsequiously in the 'Corluvaduckguy' idiom. It seems a little less amiable when one matches it with another detective thriller, *Tiger in the Smoke*, with its sinister band of ex-service tramps. Farjeon's novel appeared at a time (1926) when the kerbs were littered, so to speak, with thousands of injured, or healthy, ex-soldiers unemployed through no fault of their own, but simply due to the stagnation of the economy. Farjeon's tramp, rascally but happy, makes everyone feel quite a bit better.

Hitchcock seems relatively bored by Farjeon's old Ben, 'the glory of the Merchant Service . . . late of the Merchant Service . . . of the Merchant service', who 'was not in love with work. The stomach, however, drives.' He's lumbered with him, as incarnated by Leon M. Lion, on whose joint stage adaptation Farjeon's novel was based, and he has to devote a fair amount of preliminary footage to him, but he doesn't seem very interested, maybe because he's a distinctly problematic identification figure by conventional movie formulae, maybe because the problem of deference seems beyond redemption. In retrospect the most vivid enjoyment of all the scenes in the scarey empty house, quaking as the trains thunder by, is a jocular but really rather lyrical touch of bondage, with a girl and a man left tied by their wrists to hang, in the dark, from creaking first-floor banisters, in a deserted house, climaxed by, later, a girl handcuffed and nearly drowned in a sinking railway wagon. A sinking railway wagon!? Hitchcock has thrown the whole second half of the novel out and substituted a spirited cross-country chase between an eventually altogether out of control goods train and an abducted Green Line coach packed with variously meek or outraged fare-paying passengers, until eventually locomotive, tender, and wagon after wagon go thundering wildly on to the cross-channel ferry, sinking it, in one of the most sustained, varied and exhilarating disasters in movies. That train, coach, ferry and all are clearly models doesn't spoil things in the least, our natural preference for large-scale and genuine catastrophes being compensated for by nostalgic references to Hornby Trains and Dinky Toys, all taking on the curious artificiality of a dream, like a Trinka puppet film. The movie has all it takes to become a camp cult, and something more, something strangely precious, distilling a kind of essence of childhood pulp, producing an effect which isn't precisely capital-P-Pop art and isn't quite capital-Quaint-Camp, but something much nearer the pleasure of *The Penguin Book of Comics*, where the

question of what's good small-p-popular art is counterpointed by its affinity with what is cheapjack but alive, and one can relish a semi-participative enjoyment of past pop art. What isn't very good is far from all bad, and a kind of vivid mediocrity can have its charms—and by which one needn't be abashed of being charmed.