When we last ran "Number 17" some five years ago, its academic value was recognised, but enthusiasm otherwise was restrained. However, in the interim Hitchcock has a remarkable re-evaluation of interest in "Number 17" (viz the enthusiastic response to "Murder" and "Easy Virtue") so today it may well be accepted rather more on its own merits. The film was never released in this country, rather surprisingly since many far less suitable and far more talkie films from Britain in that period were getting American distribution.

Hitchcock has always repudiated "Number 17" as being unimportant, and has bristled it together with general fan as a film he never wanted included in Hitchcock retrospectively - an academic stricture, as until fairly recently the film wouldn't have been available anyway. In a way, one can understand Hitchcock's rejection of it - just as Fritz Lang repudiates some of his best work. It's all style and no content (which currently active directors seem to abhor) and certainly has nothing "to say". Everything is on the surface - but what an enjoyable surface it is, especially if one exercises a little patience in the too-measured first half, The last of Hitchcock's B.I.P. melodramas, only "Vallazas from Vienna" stood between it and "The Man Who Knew Too Much" in 1934, and the launching of his great Gainsborough period - "Number 17" is admittedly a shoe-string production, with a budget seriously curtailed, and if "The Man Who Knew Too Much" seems a spectacular stride forward over a mere two-year period, it is not least because of the much greater loway (in casting, locations, careful preparation, better studio facilities) that the upped-budget provided. But "Number 17", even as is, is a remarkable discovery; not only a vigorous little film but also - even so early in Hitchcock's career - is already a spoof of his own specialty. (Co-scenarist Robert Flemyng, in this book, "The Gallipool Mistress", describes a good deal of time on this film, and describes how Hitchcock's direction towards satire was deliberate, and passed completely over the heads of the studio executives who saw it only as a serious melodrama).

Most of the Hitchcock trademarks are here (although not Hitchcock himself): the mixing of melodrama with urbane comedy, ultra-civilised (ill)lains, smattering of piquant sex (the regular searching of the bathroom ladies), even such standard Hitchcockian situations as a murder gone wrong (多半 tossed aside contemptuously), and no mysterious house, and curiosity drawing him inside. Within a few moments and with no time wasted, the plot is underway visually and excitingly. What matter if, five reels later, we find that he was going to the house anyway? Based on a dull and unreadable novel by Jefferson Farjeon, the film is immediately transposed into a fascinating exercise in style. The first half, all mood, shadows and atmospheric suspense, shows just how much Hitchcock had learnt from his association with the German film in the 20's. It's "Oct and the Canary"."Warning Shadows" stuff with a vengeance, full of moving camerawork, distorted shadows, bizarre lighting and photographic composition which turns the commonplace into the nightmarish. When a trapdoor is lifted, steam from a railway train below floats menacingly upwards; a simple flight of stone steps, so lit that one sees neither top nor bottom, suggests that Hitchcock remembered - and improved on - a passage of the crypt in Dracula. It is as well that he did. So much photographic elegance to dwell upon, for the mystery element in the early portions of the film isn't strong enough to hold attention on its own. Then, at the mid-way point, it comes to life with some fast-paced serial-like melodrama (even though the fight scenes are amusingly staged, as they continued to be in British films for many years past) and then launches itself into one of Hitchcock's very best and most exciting chase climaxes. (Not that Hitchcock used the individual chase very much, preferring that the whole film be a most protracted kind of stalker in a maze, since it occupies the last third of the picture, and incidentally is a sequence not present in the original novel at all. A chase between a motor coach and a train, it builds beautifully, tends on a spectacular wreck as a bonus, and is splendidly edited. Admittedly, it makes generous use of miniature work and goes far beyond using it merely for cutaway or establishing scene purposes as in "The Lady Vanishes". Here some of the most impressive scenes
involve the prolonged use of miniatures, incredibly photographed in long sweeping tracking shots and with extremely complicated camera movements, all intercut well with the real thing. One wonders what happened to these elaborate toys, and what lucky studio executive's son may have inherited them all!

If there is a major flaw in "Number 17" it is the excessive footage given to the cockney comedy relief, Leon M. Lion, who also gets top cast billing. Not that Lion deserves it, it's just that he seems unnecessary and in the way, and given the harsh sound recording of the day, his dialect is sometimes hard to decode. The explanation is that Lion was not only an actor (and in other films, a good one) but also a notable theatrical impresario, and had money and a production hard in the whole picture. He had produced "Number 17" on stage, and in 1932 had taken over the Garrick Theatre in London where he had a considerable success with a series of Galsworthy plays, headed by "Escape" and "Justice". So he was only too willing to give him credit for being a more creative gentleman than his work in and on this film might suggest. "Number 17" is no masterpiece, but it's rare to see a really early Hitchcock (or Lang) that, in the light of their later work, doesn't seem merely a fascinating academic milestone. Lang's "The Spiders" certainly falls into that category, and so does Hitchcock's "The Lodger". But however many sign-posts it may contain to Hitchcock's later work, "Number 17" holds its own very well as an enjoyably robust thriller. Apart from the measured pacing and the admittedly economic production suggested by the frequent cross-overs between scenes, the film as a whole seems to have been produced for home consumption in 1931/32, and by 1933 were ready to tackle more ambitious films again -- "Number 17" doesn't date unduly, and is often surprisingly slick technically. It's rare to find a score as good and atmospherically effective in early British talkies; the extreme length of some of the mobile camera shots is quite extraordinary, the sound effects in the train scenes are especially well done, and some technical effects are exceptionally skillful. One split screen effect -- wheels of an authentic train linked with studio-shot footage of the villains glanbering over the top of the train -- is so good that it virtually passes unnoticed.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

STORM IN A TEACUP (Alexander Korda-London Films-United Artists, 1937)
A Victor Saville Production directed by Victor Saville and Ian Dalrymple; Screenplay by Ian Dalrymple and Donald Bull based on James Bridie's Anglo-Scottish version of a German play by Bruno Frank; Camera, Nutz Greenbaum; Art Direction, Andre Andrejew; Musical score, Frederic Lewis; Special Effects, Ned Mann and Eddie Cohen; Associate Producer, Stanley Haynes; Editor, William Hornbeck; 80 minutes

There have been many requests for this film, and the only reason for a delay has been my own limited enthusiasm for it, and the assumption that it would surface in a theatrical revival, since it is currently available for theatrical booking. However, it hasn't -- so here it is. Disappointment in it (or at least, my own disappointment) is purely comparative. Victor Saville was a major British director of the 30's, possibly second only to Hitchcock. His work is interesting and above all tasteful. The film is literate, well-acted, and has Leigh and Harrison at the peak of their youthful bloom if not their artistic maturity. Certainly there is more than enough going for it to make it a pleasant light-dramatic diversion. But it was hailed (and is remembered) as a major screen comedy on the level of Clair and Capra, and as a big improvement (which it may well have been) on a play that enjoyed substantial success on the London and New York stages. Its basic problem is that it doesn't live up to this reputation, or the promise of its opening scenes, but it is really a problem I think of audience conditioning. One has been told it is a great comedy, and it just isn't. The defect of the problem lies in the difficulty of translating German humor into British. No doubt some of the scenes were interpolated, but the Germans (filmically, theatrically, probably also in books) aren't blessed with an outstanding sense of humor. As also in "Dr. Praetorius" (remade here as "People Will Talk") they tend to use comedy to sugarcoat discussion of relatively serious issues. The British, conversely, use comedy to magnify and lampoon serious issues ("Passport to Pinllo", "The Ruling Class"). Neither approach is necessarily right or wrong, but it is difficult to like one approach and rehash it to another. Regard "Storm in a Teacup" (one can hardly fault it for being exactly what its title promises) in a light dramatic rather than a wholly comedic framework, and it may well satisfy thoroughly. --- W.K.B. ---