

Charles Bennett (screenwriter and director)

2/8/1899 - 15/6/1995

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BIOGRAPHY: Charles Bennett was a British writer, director and sometime actor most famous for his work with Alfred Hitchcock. Originally involved in the theatre, he wrote the play *Blackmail* (1929), which Hitchcock later made into the first British feature film with synchronized sound. Other writing credits as a collaborator with Hitchcock include *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *Secret Agent* (1936). Bennett later moved to Hollywood, where he worked on Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* (1940). He returned to Britain for his directorial debut, *Madness of the Heart* (1949), but spent the rest of his career in America. His Hollywood filmography is extensive, and he also wrote for television in the 1950s and 1960s. **SUMMARY:** Bennett proves to be a lively storyteller in this interview with Arnold Schwartzman, with contributions from Stuart Birnbaum. He discusses his early career in the theatre and his introduction to the film industry, which came through a meeting with Alfred Hitchcock. His working relationship with Hitchcock is discussed in some detail, as are his experiences working in Britain at BIP and Gaumont British. Bennett's Hollywood career is covered more fitfully, but he has much to say about his experiences working with Cecil B. DeMille. He also reveals that he was informally encouraged to make anti-German propaganda in Hollywood prior to American involvement in WWII, and claims that he was later recruited by the British Secret Service to spy on suspected Nazis in Los Angeles.

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Interviewer: Arnold Schwartzman

Interviewee: Charles Bennett

Also present was Charles Bennett's business partner Stuart Birnbaum.

Tape 1, Side 1

Arnold Schwartzman : Charles, where and when were you born?

Charles Bennett : I can't remember when I was born - I know when I was born and where, but I don't remember it. Yes, it was August 2nd 1899. Queen Victoria was on the throne - I don't think she knew about my birth - and it was a place called Shoreham in Sussex, where "Bungalow Town" is now. In those days there were only two or three bungalows and mine was a disused railway carriage, and I was born on the beach at Shoreham in a disused railway carriage. That any help, ha ha!?

Arnold Schwartzman : What kind of schooling did you receive?

Charles Bennett : None! Actually, that's not quite true. I had a very wonderful mother who was a very brilliant woman, and all my uncles, or her - no they would have been my uncles, yes - there were nine of them. Her father was apparently a very active gentleman! There were nine uncles. They all went to Clifton College and on to Oxford, but by the time I came along there wasn't any money! And so my mother taught me herself, and she was a very brilliant woman. The result was that when I did go to a school - St. Mark's College in Chelsea - for about a year, I was top of the school, head of the class in every way. So, obviously she was a better teacher than I could have found anywhere else. That was all. At fourteen I gave up everything and became an actor. And that was it...

Arnold Schwartzman : Oh, sorry, I must ask a question! What made you decide to go into film?

Charles Bennett : I didn't decide to go into film. It sort of happened. Actually, I started professionally in the theatre, I suppose when I was eleven. That was in Max Reinhardt's production of *The Miracle at Olympia* in 1911. And then I went back to the theatre when I was fourteen, and I played... Yes! Talking of films, I'm always forgetting that I was by way of being a film star! I always forget that. They made a film in about 1914 - *Samuelsons*, down in Walton Hall, Isleworth - of John Halifax: Gentleman, which was a famous book by a woman named Mrs. Craik. I played John Halifax when young, and a guy named Fred Paul, who was by way of a British film star, played him when he was older. So I was in films, I'd forgotten that, yes! But I don't think I was quite up there with Mickey Rooney! Ha ha! 'Cause nobody wanted me anymore! I mean, that was that. Anyway, I remember when I was fourteen I went on tour with a musical comedy called *'The Marriage Market'*, playing a "biddy." And from then on I was an actor - a very bad one, by the way, I think - but I was an actor right up 'til I went into the army for World War One, when I was seventeen. Then I was in France for over a year, fighting Germans. Then I came back, and I had no profession. So I went on to being an actor again - I still think a bad one - but I kept on being in Shakespearean companies, and that's the best possible training. And then I was with the Bristol Little Theatre for a while, in a new play every week. This was magnificent training, and I became rather a good actor. By the time I was twenty-five I was starring at the Albert Premier Theatre in Paris, where we were doing a new play every two weeks - or, a revival of a play every two weeks. And I was the star: it was my name outside,

and that was amazing! [indecipherable] Anyway, there I am. But the amazing thing was that while I was - now, this is coming to the point - while I was acting at the Albert Premier in Paris, in spite of the fact that every morning meant rehearsing the next play, and then acting sometimes two matinees a week, and then every evening for six nights, somehow I managed to write three plays during that time. I must have been writing at night most of the time. Anyway, I wrote three plays, and in 1927 - by that time I was acting in London and doing rather well too - but in 1927 I had my first play produced, a play called 'The Return', which got wonderful reviews, but never made any money. But that was quickly followed by 'Blackmail' at the Globe Theatre, starring Tallulah Bankhead. And that's where the beginning of films, from my point of view, comes in, because Hitchcock - who was a little tubby fat man, who was exactly my age, by the way: only six day's difference - fell in love with the play, and said, "This is a film," got British International Pictures to buy it, and that was it! So 'Blackmail' became the first talking picture ever made in England, and I was in the industry. I still continued to write plays. I had a very successful play at the Comedy called 'The Last Hour' - that was in '29 - and then later on I had Greer Garson's play at the Garrick. I also wrote and directed a play of my own at the Lyceum called 'Sensation'.

Anyway, once having got my feet wet a bit with 'Blackmail' - not that I had very much to do with the actual picture being made, but Hitch and I had long talks on the subject, and that kind of thing, and I was very helpful - then eventually I wrote a lot of little small pictures on the side. In those days I was rather good at writing something in about two weeks: a complete script, including the story, in about two weeks, for which I'd be paid three or four hundred pounds - which was a lot of money in those days. I wrote about ten of them, and I can't remember what any of 'em are about now. That's awful! But anyway, British International Pictures asked me to come under contract, so I came there and there was Hitch - Hitch under contract too. So he said, "Charles, come on: work with me." They held the rights to 'Bulldog Drummond' - 'Bulldog Drummond' was a famous character in British popular stuff - so Hitch had been asked to do a picture about 'Bulldog Drummond'. It hadn't any story at all. So Hitch said to me: "Would you write a story about 'Bulldog Drummond?'" I said, "Yes, certainly." I came up with something called 'Bulldog Drummond's Baby', and it was a good story, very good story. Anyway, I finished it. I went on to a horrible thing called 'Hawleys of the High Street' [N.B. 'Hawley's of High Street'], I remember, for a comedian at British International. Eventually my contract finished, and so did Hitch's. And Hitch went to Gaumont-British where they said, "What do you want to make?" He said, "Well, there's this story about 'Bulldog Drummond's Baby', but we can't get Bulldog Drummond's rights - they've got it." So Gaumont-British bought the 'Bulldog Drummond's Baby' story, but not the rights to 'Bulldog Drummond'. So we changed every character - their names - and we remade the picture, or made the picture, and it was 'The Man Who Knew Too Much', which has been made twice. From then on, of course, I was very much in the industry with Hitch, because we followed that directly with... Oh, I must tell you first of all, C.M. Woolf - who literally controlled the cinema in England in those days; he owned General Film Distributors, and nothing was put out in England, coming from America or anywhere, without his nod - he saw 'The Man Who Knew Too Much' before the public did. And he said, "This is awful!" He told Michael Balcon, the head of Gaumont-British that he couldn't have anything to do with it, and General Film Distributors wouldn't handle it unless it was remade with a new director, different cast, different writers, everything. Hitch was broken-hearted, because by that time he and I were working on 'The 39 Steps', so everything stopped for about ten weeks. And Hitch went to Isidore Ostrer who owned Gaumont-British, practically went on his knees and said, "Look, you're the powerful guy here. Tell C.M. Woolf we're putting the

picture out in spite of him" - that kind of thing. So, C.M. Woolf said, "All right, I'll do it. But I object to it, and I say it'll be a flop." Well, it opened at the New Gallery in Regent Street and was a vast success - much to C.M. Woolf's fury, of course. But C.M. Woolf actually was the eventual winner because when it came to the film being shown all over England, C.M. Woolf's General Film Distributors put it out as number two in a double feature which meant that the picture never really got its money back - which was a dreadful bit of spite on the part of C.M. Woolf. Anyway, 'The 39 Steps' was all set again, and then I just continued to work with Hitch. We did 'The Secret Agent' with Madeleine Carroll and John Gielgud - a young John Gielgud, who, incidentally, didn't like Hitch at all because, he told me, he said, "he's giving all the best angles and every scene to Madeleine Carroll!" He was furious about that, but nothing happened, nothing could be done about it. Anyway, John was very good, very good in the film. And then we did... I think it was... Oh, I'll tell you a lovely thing in those days which was very pleasant from a writer's point of view. I remember when I was working on 'The Secret Agent' it got a bit sticky in the middle. Actually, 'The Secret Agent' was a collection of Somerset Maugham's stories which I had to take and make it into one story, and it was a sticky time. Our producer, Ivor Montagu, was staying in the Basel Kandersteg in Switzerland, a lovely, lovely place deep in the mountains. So Hitch and I just went there and had conferences with him in the Lauterbrunnen valley and places like that, and everything was solved. That was a pleasant way of working, you know! Another pleasant way of working with Hitch was he and Alma, his wife, and my wife Maggie, every Christmas - we did this for four years - every Christmas, into the New Year, we'd go to St. Moritz, the Palace Hotel in St. Moritz, and Maggie would ski, I would ski, Alma would ski - Hitch would sit in the bar at the Palace Hotel and wait until we came back! But we were supposedly working on another story. Never did a stroke of work at all! But Gaumont-British was paying us still, and that kind of thing, so it was fine. Anyway, then we did 'Sabotage' with Sylvia Sidney and that was when Robert Donat was supposed to play it, and he was awfully sick. That was why he didn't play 'Captain Blood' for Warner Brothers, because he was suddenly sick. Because of this we had to play John Loder, who was a very, very good- looking man, but not Robert Donat! Sylvia Sidney was furious. She's come across the Atlantic to play with Donat, not with John Loder, so she wouldn't speak to Hitch except on the set - that was all - and never did speak to him from thereon. It wasn't Hitch's fault anyway, but she insisted it was! Can't remember if there was another picture... But around that time I was working on a picture which over there we called 'Young and Innocent'. No, I think we called it 'The Girl Was Young', and it became 'Young and Innocent'. But, about that time Myron Selznick's office over here had noticed me and they talked to Universal Pictures, and Universal made me an offer to come over for \$1000 a week - which in those days was a lot of money. Much more money than we could get in England! So I came over, leaving Hitch, and when I got to Universal here they hadn't any money, they'd run out of money. They'd had two flops in a row so instead of my working for Universal, they loaned me to Sam Goldwyn promptly - and made a profit, which made me very angry when I heard about the profit! But I was in the Hollywood film industry and I've been here ever since. That's it. Does that answer your "How I came into the film industry?"

Arnold Schwartzman : Absolutely! Ha Ha!

Charles Bennett : Ha Ha! My parents were dead before I came into it, so I had no connections whatever, no. But my mother, you see, had been... she was a very clever artist. I'll show you later something of hers. But she also wanted to be an actress and that's how she lost her money:

backing plays to put herself in them, and the plays flopped, you see, and that kind of thing - terrible! Anyway, she died in 1930 - yes, after 'Blackmail' had been made. But she didn't know much about it really.

Arnold Schwartzman : Actually - I'm just thinking aloud here slightly - did you know Wontner, the actor?

Charles Bennett : Who?

Arnold Schwartzman : Wontner. I can't remember his first name now. He played Sherlock Holmes on the stage.

Charles Bennett : Arthur Wontner? Not very well, but, of course, Arthur Wontner was famous in those days.

Arnold Schwartzman : The reason why I mention that is we were discussing the other day about the Savoy Hotel and Arthur's son was Sir Hugh Wontner, the chairman of the Savoy Hotel, and erm...okay...

Stuart Birnbaum: Charles, didn't you play Doctor Watson?

Charles Bennett : Oh, if you're talking about Sherlock Holmes, yes!

Arnold Schwartzman : Really?

Charles Bennett : I played Doctor Watson in Paris. This was before I became a star, but I was Doctor Watson to Edward Stirling's [Sterling's?] Sherlock Holmes, and Conan Doyle came in - he was in Paris - and came in one night to see our show, sat through it 'til the end and came around the back, and said, "I want to meet this guy Charles Bennett," and Stirling said, "Oh, yes, fine. But why?" He said, "He's the best Doctor Watson we've ever known!" And I was only twenty-four at that time, so I can't have been a bad actor really! I never told Nigel Bruce that Conan Doyle had said this, but, anyway, Nigel Bruce came later so it doesn't matter.

Arnold Schwartzman : Very interesting. When you were in the army you were in the Royal Artillery?

Charles Bennett : No!

Arnold Schwartzman : Not the Royal Artillery? No, sorry, the Royal Fusiliers?

Charles Bennett : The Royal Fusiliers, yes.

Arnold Schwartzman : Did you do any acting, or...

Charles Bennett : Oh no!

Arnold Schwartzman : Just fighting?

Charles Bennett : Just fighting! Ha ha!

Arnold Schwartzman : I assume that you lived in London, or...?

Charles Bennett : Oh, yes. At the time that 'Blackmail' was made I was living in West Halkin St., overlooking Belgrave Square, you know. It was lovely, lovely to live there, I loved it. And I hated to leave, but I lived there all the time, through all my Hitchcock days and my early film days, until I came to America. I wish I'd got that flat still, it was a beautiful one.

Arnold Schwartzman : It's a very nice area isn't it?

Charles Bennett : Ah ha.

Arnold Schwartzman : Can you tell me what your working day and working week was like, from the moment you got up?

Charles Bennett : Well, let's talk about when I was at Gaumont-British, when I was under contract. All my life I've always made a point... I'm never in the studio until about half-past ten. I think it's much too early to come in earlier than that. The way I used to do it - working with Hitch, for example - before I left West Halkin St., I would call Hitch and say, "I'm coming," and when I came along Cromwell Road, you know, there would Hitch be, waiting on the kerb for me to pick him up. We'd go to the studio, and then he and I would have a little talk - usually in the morning. About one o'clock he'd say: "Lunch time!" So we got in me car again and we'd go to the Mayfair Hotel - always the Mayfair. Had lunch at the Mayfair; come back; then Hitch would go to sleep for - ha ha! - most of the afternoon, and I would go to my own office and work. Then about five, or five-thirty, Hitch would be calling me and saying, "Come on, time to finish." So we'd go back to his flat in Cromwell Road for cocktails. And d'you know that more creative work was done over those cocktails than at any other time. I mean, you see, Hitch was amazing. He'd come up with wonderful ideas- the greatest struggle was, from the writer's point of view, so often the ideas had nothing whatever to do with the story, so you couldn't get them in! You had to fight to get in a good idea. But it sometimes worked, and Hitch could be very creative. Once he'd got a cocktail in his hand, that was it, heh heh!

-----N.B. An abrupt cut in the recording. CB is obviously examining photographs-----

Charles Bennett : That's 1925. That was a beautiful theatre built especially for the Paris Exhibition of 1925. And we represented England there at the theatre. I was playing Algernon in 'The Importance of Being Earnest', which was one of my favourite parts. 1925 - you see there was a large English audience in Paris, so there was no difficulty whatever...

Arnold Schwartzman : After 'Blackmail', which was 1929?

Charles Bennett : No! Much earlier.

Arnold Schwartzman : Ah, so my reference book is incorrect then.

Charles Bennett : 'Blackmail' was 1929. Did you say '39'?

Arnold Schwartzman : No, I did say '29.

Charles Bennett : '29. And then, chronologically, there were all these little pictures which, as I said, I don't know what they were about much. Anna Lee - I gave her her first job in one of these. She can't remember what it was about either! Anyway, I did a wonderful, wonderful... Between 'The Man Who Knew Too Much', and it was before 'The 39 Steps', I did a picture called 'The Clairvoyant' with Claude Rains and Fay Wray, and it was a very good picture indeed. They put it out over here under the title of 'The Evil Mind'. It had nothing to do with the "evil mind," but anyway that was typical! Typical Hollywood in those days. It was so typical of Hollywood - I remember my friend Cecil Howard, the Honourable Cecil Howard, he was the brother of that famous Earl of Suffolk who died during the war, you know, so wonderfully. He was living here and was called in by M.G.M. as the specialist on Eton, because he'd been to Eton. They were doing a picture with Mickey Rooney called 'A Yank at Eton'. So, every time they'd start a scene poor Cecil would break in: "No! We wouldn't have done it that way at Eton. No, no, no, no, no! And the director would just say, "Oh, Shaddap! Who cares the way you did it at Eton!" So poor Cecil never really knew why he was there. Naturally, the Yank got the girl at the end, or something like that. Heh Heh!

Arnold Schwartzman : Sounds like another film called 'Chumps at Oxford' [N.B. 'A Chump at Oxford'] with Laurel and Hardy.

Charles Bennett : Or 'A Yank at Oxford'.

Arnold Schwartzman : And I suppose '36 was 'The Secret Agent'?

Charles Bennett : 'Secret Agent'. And then...

Arnold Schwartzman : I'm sorry, if I could just go back a bit, could you tell us about Claude Rains if there's anything interesting? I mean, he was a fascinating actor.

Charles Bennett : A lovely person, with more sense of humour than... Oh, a delightful person, though I think I've told the story... Would you like me to tell the story - it's rather nice? As I said, the leading lady was...

Arnold Schwartzman : Alice Faye, did you say?

Charles Bennett : Fay Wray! Anyway, there was a lovely, lovely, lovely girl playing the second part called Jane Baxter. I was doing the awful thing of writing just ahead of the camera. The

assistant director would come up and say, "got any pages for Mr. Elvey down there" - Maurice Elvey, the director. Anyway, one day Claude Rains came up to my office, and he said "Charles, have you noticed this girl Jane Baxter who's playing the second part?" I said "Yes! She's quite lovely." I said "Why?" He said, "Well, it may interest you to know that she never stops talking about you." I said, "Oh? How interesting!" So I came down on the set; I met her. We became tremendous friends. And when the picture was over, one night, I remember, she and I went out to dinner down at Bray. The thing about Bray was there was a lovely hotel there, and you dined on the lawn, with the Thames flowing by. Over dinner she said, "Charles, do you know how I came to know you?" I said, "No. Tell me, why?" She said, "Claude Rains came to me and said, 'Have you noticed the writer Charles Bennett up there in his office?'" And she said, "Yes, I've seen him." He said, "He never stops talking about you!" Ha ha ha! So we sent a cable to Claude Rains that night - by that time he was on the Atlantic coming back to America - just thanking him for bringing us together. It was charming! But he was a lovely person, and I had him again in pictures over here, as you probably know.

-----Abrupt cut in recording-----

Charles Bennett : ...pictures at the Beaconsfield one. It was something Lion.

Arnold Schwartzman : British Lion?

Charles Bennett : British Lion I think it was, yes. I did a couple of cheap pictures for them, I remember.

Arnold Schwartzman : Now the Beaconsfield studios are the film school, the National Film School. I was stationed there in the Army Education Corps before they sent me off to Korea. After 'Secret Agent', was 'Sabotage' next?

Charles Bennett : It had to be 'Sabotage'. Let me see, I did seven movies for Hitch: 'Blackmail', 'The Man Who Knew Too Much', 'The 39 Steps', 'Sabotage', 'Young and Innocent'... There's another one which I can't place at the moment.

Arnold Schwartzman : 'Foreign Correspondent'?

Charles Bennett : 'Foreign Correspondent'! That was here. And with 'The Man Who Knew Too Much' being made twice it was eight pictures with Hitch.

Arnold Schwartzman : A question came up before about the various studios in England. Can you tell us anything about your recollections of the conditions, or what things were like in the studios then?

Charles Bennett : Well, it depends. I only really knew two of the studios very, very well. I knew British International Pictures, which was not a pleasant place to be. John Maxwell, who owned it, was a nasty sort of unpleasant man, and a horrible little man named Walter Mycroft was the

story editor. Hitch very cruelly used to say of Mycroft - Mycroft was a hunchback - and Hitch very cruelly used to say: "If you break his back open you'll find chocolates!" Ha ha ha! Horrible, horrible - but that was Hitch. Hitch came up with things like that. Anyway, I didn't like British International Pictures, but I adored Gaumont-British. Because there we'd got Michael Balcon, who was knighted afterwards, you remember, and he was a most delightful man in every way. I mean, he was your friend: you lunched together, you dined together and you stayed the weekend with him in the country, and things like that. It was that kind of studio: very, very pleasant. Isidore Ostrer - and there was his brother, who was not a very nice man, but we kept away from him - Isidore Ostrer never came near the studios, so the whole thing was Michael Balcon. And they had a charming story editor named Angus MacPhail. It was a very pleasant - I've never known anywhere as pleasant to work as was Gaumont-British.

Arnold Schwartzman : That wasn't the... What was the Gainsborough studios?

Charles Bennett : Gainsborough was part of Gaumont-British. It was owned by... When I made *The Clairvoyant* with Claude Rains I was under contract to Gaumont-British, but they also owned the Gainsborough studio, and sometimes they put out a picture as a "Gainsborough" picture. That was the way it worked, yes.

Arnold Schwartzman : Was that J. Arthur Rank, or before Rank?

Charles Bennett : Oh, nobody had ever heard of Rank!

Arnold Schwartzman : Was Korda around then?

Charles Bennett : Korda was around, yes. But Rank was a... he made a vast fortune out of flour or something.

Arnold Schwartzman : Yes, in flour mills.

Charles Bennett : Flour mills, yes. But he hadn't touched the film industry. In fact, he really didn't emerge until the war really - this is World War Two. I've a very interesting story about that - shall I tell it now?

Arnold Schwartzman : Yes, please.

Charles Bennett : I came over to England to write propaganda for the Ministry of Information, and while I was there Laurence Olivier - who I knew very well, and liked very much - said, "Charles, do you think that the Ministry would let you write a movie," and I said, "I don't know. You'd better ask them." So he asked them, and they said, "Yes. He's been doing very good work. Let him go and earn some money, that's fine," because I was working for nothing. So, they asked me to write a picture called 'The Trial of Madeleine Smith'. I think I wrote a very good script. But, anyway, in those days the great company in England was Two Cities, which was controlled and owned by a man named Filippo del Giudice. It was Two Cities that made 'Henry V', and those famous pictures like... oh, the Ronald Neame one about two people who fell in love, all the great pictures. But, I remember the first time I met del Giudice, who was a charming, delightful

man, and lived at a place called Sheepcote - not very far from Bray and Berkshire. Anyway, the first time I went there was for lunch, I remember, with Larry Olivier and Vivien Leigh - I got to know her, and liked her very much; I sat next to her at lunch, I remember. But after lunch del Giudice - by the way, he used to hold all his conferences in bed in the morning, and half the studio would come and talk to him before he got up in the morning - del said to me, "Charles, why don't you come down for the weekend?" So I said, "I'd like to very much." He said, "There'll be just the two of us, but we'll be able to talk and have fun." I said, "Good, good." So I came down for the weekend, and he and I... He was a very interesting man, and that night he told me how broken-hearted he was; he'd sold his control of Two Cities to Arthur Rank. And he said, "I've lost my baby. I've lost everything really." He said, "I'm still a rich man, but that's it, you know." And this guy had made 'In Which We Serve' and all that kind of thing. Anyway, we talked, and I comforted him, and presently it was time to go to bed. I hadn't been to my bedroom, so he took me up to my bedroom, and he said, "There you are Charles, be comfortable." The bed was twelve feet wide! I looked at this huge bed, and I said, "Do you mean to tell me I have to sleep there alone?" I have never seen anybody so terribly embarrassed. He said, "Oh, Charles. Oh, please forgive me! Please forgive me, I hadn't thought about that." He said, "Come down next weekend. I promise you you won't have to sleep alone. And you don't have to meet her until you go to bed!" Ha ha ha! But he was a charming man. Anyway, he lost his company to Rank. He controlled Denham and all the big studios; Rank got them all.

Arnold Schwartzman : Amazing. Did you know Michael Powell?

Charles Bennett : Very well, yes. I never worked with him, but I knew him, of course. I'm just trying to remember now... I told you about Sylvia Sidney's reaction at not getting Donat - I told you that. 'Sabotage' was a very pleasant picture; I think it was a very good picture. I liked Sylvia; I think she did a good job. But there's not much to tell really.

Arnold Schwartzman : I notice that on television this week there's another production of 'King Solomon's Mines', with Richard Chamberlain. I don't know how recent that was.

Charles Bennett : I don't know. I wonder about that myself, yes.

Arnold Schwartzman : But I did see - I didn't watch it - but I believe that your version of 'King Solomon's Mines' was on television this week. Or last week.

Charles Bennett : Oh, was it?

Arnold Schwartzman : It certainly wasn't the Stewart Granger one, so it must have been the 1937 one.

Charles Bennett : Must have been, yes - with Anna Lee. I withdrew from that picture, as I think I told you. I loved Rider Haggard's story. I loved Sir Henry Curtis and Captain Good, and Allan Quartermaine and Umbopa. The only woman was Gagool the witch, and I strongly objected to having a woman put in to come along on a trip like that, you know. Eventually, I said, "I don't want anything more to do with it!" But Anna played it.

Arnold Schwartzman : Was it Deborah Kerr in the Stewart Granger one?

Charles Bennett : No! No! Of course, the Stewart Granger one was much later. That was out here. Compton Bennett - whose name was often confused with me - directed it. Or co-directed it. No, the original one was Cedric Hardwicke playing Allan Quartermaine, and John Loder was in it too.

Arnold Schwartzman : It's interesting - I don't know if you will recall this, because it's become a mystery to me. Because of my origins as a graphic designer I was particularly interested in what must have been one of your early Hitchcock films where the title design were very abstract, very simple ones, by McKnight Kauffer. Are you familiar with McKnight Kauffer? I can't place which film it was. McKnight Kauffer was an incredibly brilliant American designer that went to England and was there for many years, and did many famous underground posters. And I was intrigued to see he actually did film titles when in those days they just had ticket writers doing titles. When the United States came into the Second World War, McKnight Kauffer, being very patriotic, came back to the States. And he was really ahead of his time, and was unrecognised in America, like he was in the U.K - which was a great shame. I know it was one of those early Hitchcock films - whether it was 'Blackmail' or 'The Man Who Knew Too Much'... But I was very pleasantly surprised to see on the credits: "Credits Designed by McKnight Kauffer." And I mentioned this recently to the man who brought me over here, Saul Bass, who has another story about Hitchcock - he was the one who supposedly directed the shower sequence in 'Psycho'. Anyway...

Charles Bennett : You do know that 'Blackmail' was made as a silent first? And that was when Hitch went to John Maxwell and said, "Let me make one sequence in sound." And John Maxwell said, "I don't think so, but yes, go ahead." So Hitch closed the set, and made the whole picture in sound! Ha! Wonderful hmm?

Arnold Schwartzman : It was completely sound? Not just the odd...

Charles Bennett : He did use the silent opening, you remember, with the police chase and the man being arrested. But after that it was completely sound, yes.

Arnold Schwartzman : And that was, what, only two years after sound came in?

Charles Bennett : Yes.

Arnold Schwartzman : Can you tell us something about 'Balalaika'?

Charles Bennett : What about 'Balalaika'? Nelson Eddy was... Yes, that was a funny experience from my point of view, because I'd come to M.G.M. to write a picture called 'Cause for Alarm', which was an Eric Ambler novel - very bad novel! But Lawrence Weingarten who was the producer had fallen in love with the first four pages, and the thing was bought on the first four pages. But there wasn't any story, it was absolutely dreadful. I was having a very bad time with it; I think it went on for about eight weeks, getting no place. Larry - I was very fond of Larry, Lawrence Weingarten, he was a very nice man - but I knew he was getting impatient, and I

couldn't get anywhere with it. Anyway, I was thinking any moment now they're going to say, "Well we'll get somebody else to try it," and it never does any good to be thrown out of a picture. So Larry Weingarten one day sent across a little scene to me from 'Balalaika' and he said to me, "See what you can do with this, Charles. We've had fourteen writers write this scene and nobody's come through with anything yet. So see if you can do anything." Anyway, I sat down and I wrote a six-page scene, which I quite liked, and I took it to Larry. And there was Larry, sitting there in his office, and there was a guy lying on this couch - like where Stuart is now. Larry said, "You got the scene?" and I said, "Yes, here it is." I passed it to him and I saw this guy looking at me, so I said, "Let him read it too." I didn't know who he was. So he took it. We hadn't been introduced, nothing. Larry read the scene very fast like that - da da da - and threw it on the ground and said, "I don't get it. I don't get it at all Charles. This must be a puzzling scene because you haven't got it either." So I said, "Wait a minute: that guy over there seems to be rather interested." There was this pleasant looking, elderly middle age man going very carefully: page to page, page to page, page to page. Silence in the room. Finally, he came to the last page. He put it down and he said "Zis, zis..."

Tape 1, Side 2

[some dialogue missing]

Charles Bennett : ...Reinhold Schunzel, the German director who'd come over to make 'Balalaika'. The result was that Larry Weingarten picked it up, read it again and said, "Yes, it's good. It's a good scene." He didn't know until he'd told him it was a good scene! Ha ha! And, anyway, the result was that I was taken off 'Cause for Alarm' - which delighted me, being taken off it - and put on 'Balalaika'. So I really wrote 'Balalaika' for Nelson Eddy. Now let's have a little break.

-----Abrupt cut in recording-----

Charles Bennett : I worked on 'Kind Lady', yes. I wouldn't say that I did a great job on it, but I did work on it.

Stuart Birnbaum: 'Foreign Correspondent' was for whom?

-----Abrupt cut in recording-----

Charles Bennett : ...going to a cocktail party of his for Somerset Maugham. Somerset Maugham was a friend of his from way back. Nice man. You knew Somerset Maugham did you?

Arnold Schwartzman : Well, I wouldn't say I knew him. I met him once!

Charles Bennett : Did you meet that awful young man who inherited...?

Arnold Schwartzman : No, I didn't. What it was, I designed all the graphics for a television series on his short stories. And he came on the set to see one of the productions, so I was lined up to meet him!

Charles Bennett : God, what a storyteller he was! You think of the stories that guy wrote.

-----Abrupt cut in recording-----

Charles Bennett : ...said he was Somerset Maugham. Otherwise the greatest of all - because he was lyricist, composer, and storyteller, and dramatist - was Noel Coward. There was no question about that.

Arnold Schwartzman : Did you ever work with Coward?

Charles Bennett : Well, I knew him. I never worked with him, but I knew Coward reasonably well. Actually I liked him very much. And he never made a pass at me, no! Ha ha ha! He was a very nice man. Very intelligent.

Arnold Schwartzman : Were you often on the set with Hitchcock when he was shooting?

Charles Bennett : Usually when Hitch was shooting - particularly when I was working with Hitch - I would be in my office writing, and only occasionally going on the set. I mean, I was never sort of on the set with Hitch, no. But I would go down and see how they were doing, that kind of thing. And then I'd go back and... I was probably writing 'Sabotage', or that sort of thing, you see. The same with DeMille over here. I wrote four big features for DeMille - one of them wasn't produced, but three were. I was working with a very nice guy, a very good writer. His dialogue was tough dialogue, and my dialogue is rather gentle dialogue - pretty dialogue really, ha ha! (He's tough dialogue over there, by the way.) I was working with Allan Le May, and we would be writing the next picture for DeMille. While the thing was shooting, we'd be writing 'The Story of Dr. Wassell', but if he got stuck we'd come across and provide him with a few lines, or whatever he wanted. That was it. No, writers as a general rule did not have much to do with the actual shooting of their pictures in those days. Which I think is wrong: I think a writer should be on the set.

Arnold Schwartzman : Yes, I would have thought so.

Charles Bennett : That's why some writers become directors. That's why I became a director.

Arnold Schwartzman : I'd like to come to that in a moment. What was 'Madness of the Heart', your first...?

Charles Bennett : 'Madness of the Heart' was a sad story. I had written this script 'The Trail of Madeleine Smith' for Larry Olivier and Two Cities films. Awfully good script - I looked at it the other day: it's terrific. Anyway, at the same time I signed a contract with Two Cities - which afterwards went to Rank. But I came over and directed a picture for them. Fine. Then to my horror I got cablegrams, or something, from London saying that David Lean wanted to make the 'Madeleine Smith' picture and that he'd have his own script, because his wife - what was her name, I can't remember? She'd played in a thing called 'The Painted Veil' [N.B. 'The Seventh Veil'], or something. D'you remember?

Arnold Schwartzman : No, I can't remember that one....

Charles Bennett : Anyway, she wanted to play Madeleine Smith. So they said, "Terribly sorry, but we have to transfer you to another story - to write and direct it." Well, I didn't mind particularly at that time, because it meant a lot of money: they were paying me quite a considerable sum to write, and quite a considerable sum to direct. Until I saw the story. God, it was awful! It was a pappy, sort of, bit of drivel! I didn't know what I could do with it. Anyway, I did the best I could with it, and I think my direction was very good. But it was a mess from my point of view. All I got out of it was money, heh, heh!

Arnold Schwartzman : That happens a lot sometimes!

Charles Bennett : Incidentally, I remember a rather nice... Robert Clark - who by that time was the head of British International Pictures [sic]. Delightful man. He was a great friend of mine, and I'd known him since my days at B.I.P. He and I had lunch together one day, and he said, "Charles, when you've finished this picture for Rank, do one for us." I said, "Fine! I'd love to." He said, "Well, how much are they paying you to do this thing over there?" I said, "Four thousand pounds." He's a Scotsman, and he said, "There isn't a no such money in the world!" Heh, heh! "No such money in the world!" Ha, ha ha! I mean, they'd pay their directors about a thousand pounds a share, and that sort of thing! So, I never made a picture for Robert Clark.

Arnold Schwartzman : You received an Academy Award nomination for 'Foreign Correspondent', and was that the same year that 'The Great Dictator' was also nominated?

Charles Bennett : Yes, that got it...No! Sturges got it for - what was it for?

[Mumbled background discussion]

Arnold Schwartzman : Anyway, can you tell us something about 'Foreign Correspondent'?

Charles Bennett : 'Foreign Correspondent': that was a strange story too, because Walter Wanger had bought the rights to a famous documentary book - I can't remember who, er... it's in there

somewhere: "Berlin Diary," or something like that - about the war, you know. They intended to make a picture out of this. So, he borrowed Hitch from David Selznick - much to Hitch's fury. I'll tell you that story now. Hitch was getting \$2500 a week. Myron Selznick was his agent, so he got \$250 of it. Anyway, Wanger borrowed Hitch and paid David Selznick \$7500 a week as Hitch was getting \$2250 a week. He was absolutely furious about this, but there was nothing he could do about it! Anyway, 'Foreign Correspondent'. He read the thing and... no story! It was good, but no story. Wonderful! So he called me in - his old standby, you see - and I really wrote the story of 'Foreign Correspondent'; there's no question about that. Hitch as usual came through with some brilliant ideas, many of which couldn't be used - some could be, occasionally. And we got a good picture out of it, yes. And we got some lovely people eventually to play this excellent dialogue (occasionally) for us. Benchley came in, and things like that. It was a good picture. It was a composite picture - let's put it like that. But it was my story, essentially, let's put it that way. At least I can take full credit for the story of 'Foreign Correspondent'.

Arnold Schwartzman : It's interesting that we can all remember 'Foreign Correspondent', but we can't remember the film that won that year! Obviously 'Foreign Correspondent' was more memorable a film. The other day we saw Joan of Paris, which I thought was wonderful.

Charles Bennett : Oh, you were there, of course.

Arnold Schwartzman : Yes, it was great. Could you tell us something about the making of that?

Charles Bennett : Only that I'd been writing for DeMille. Yes, I'd just finished 'The Story of Dr. Wassell' for DeMille. Then R.K.O was going to make this Joan of Paris, and they'd got a... who I thought was a very good writer - Ellis St. Joseph - who worked on it. But his screenplay wasn't very good. And it made me sad, because I thought he was a hell of a good writer. But it didn't work, so they called me in. And... I don't know, David Hempstead, who was producing it, thought I was the cat's whiskers, and everything I did was absolutely right from his point of view. I enjoyed it immensely, yes. Robert Stevenson - Anna Lee's husband at that time - directed it, and I thought he did a very good job. From my point of view, it was a very enjoyable experience, the whole thing. I enjoyed writing it; I enjoyed going down on the set and seeing how it was coming along. I loved Laird Cregar, who was playing the homosexual - but simply wonderful. I mean, you remember as the.... he was a beautiful actor - tragic that he died, because he was wonderful. You know how he died?

Arnold Schwartzman : No.

Charles Bennett : Oh! He was very fat, you see. As you remember, he was up to about 280lbs., or something like that. And he was under contract to 20th Century Fox, and they said... they loved him. And he decided that he should become a leading man, a young leading man. He was only 24 or 25: he would have been very good looking as a young leading man. So, he had to lose weight; doctors advised him what to take, and boiled the whole thing up - and he died trying to come down to 150lbs. That was the end of him. He was a lovely, lovely, lovely actor. But then, that picture had so many good actors. You think of Thomas Mitchell, for example - you remember, he played the priest. Beautiful performance! And Alan Ladd: Alan Ladd... oh, I'll tell you about that. That was interesting. We wanted somebody to play this part "Baby". The war

was on, and most of the young people were in England anyway, or in Germany fighting Germans, or something of the sort. Anyway, we wanted somebody, and arrived at a cocktail party. And there was this lady who was Alan Ladd's agent. She came up to me - she had done some agenting for me in England before that. She came up to me and said, "Charles, I hear you want somebody for a part in Joan of Paris. I said, "Yes. A young Englishman who's shot down and dies in the sewers of Paris." She said, "I've got him!" I said, "Who? Where?" She said, "He's over there." I looked across and saw there was a young man over there. I said, "Who is he?" She said, "His name is Alan Ladd." I said, "Well, is he English?" She said, "No, he's American, but he can be sufficiently English." So I said, "Well, bring him over!" Anyway, this young man came across, and I said to him, "Do you think you could play an English part?" He said, "Of course I could!" So he acted in front of me at this cocktail party, and I thought, "Yes! This is it, this is it." So next day I went to David Hempstead, the producer, and to Robert Stevenson, the director, and said, "I've found 'Baby' for us!" So they brought him in, tested him, and he got it. Paramount saw him in it and put him under contract immediately, and that was the beginning of Alan Ladd! Amazing, hmm?

Arnold Schwartzman : He's extremely good looking in that...

Charles Bennett : ...And a very good performance.

Arnold Schwartzman : Yes it was. I just loved it, and I loved your lines in it - there's some wonderful lines.

Charles Bennett : Which lines are those, ha ha!?

Arnold Schwartzman : Well, I can't remember any particular ones...

Charles Bennett : All my lines are good! Heh, heh, heh!

Arnold Schwartzman : Well, there are so many: it was just one after the other. And also I love that little bit with the Latin: that bit of dialogue between him and the priest about remembering his Latin from when he was a...

Charles Bennett : ...I don't know what you're talking about! Heh, heh, heh!

Arnold Schwartzman : Or was that from another film? No, it was from that: a message in Latin.

Charles Bennett : Oh, yes! Yes, yes, yes. That's right, yes.

Arnold Schwartzman : I suddenly thought I'd got the wrong film!

Unidentified interviewer: I was impressed that someone could learn Latin so quickly!

Charles Bennett : My Latin isn't very good, anyway! Ha, ha!

Unidentified interviewer: For someone with no education it's astounding.

Arnold Schwartzman : You talked before about 'Reap the Wild Wind', about DeMille.

Charles Bennett : Oh, you know the story about the giant squid of course. Do you want me to tell it?

Arnold Schwartzman : Oh, please do. You told that to us the other day, but we wouldn't mind you repeating it...

Charles Bennett : Would you like to hear it?

Arnold Schwartzman : Yes please!

Charles Bennett : That was interesting because we'd got the film. And I'd reconstructed the whole thing, I must admit, and it was good. But we hadn't got the end, and DeMille - of whom I was extremely fond; I liked that man very, very much. Because it was Allan and I working together we came across to his office. And he said, "Well, gentlemen, what about the end?" Silence! He looked at Allan and said, "You got the end, Allan?" Allan said, "I haven't got the faintest idea." He said, "Charles?" I said, "No, sorry." He said "We got to get the end!" That was the end of the conference. The next day we came into his office again. "Got the end?" We hadn't. "Got the end?" Allan said, "No, nothing." He said, "Charles, you got the end?" I said, "Yes!" He said, "What?!" Ha, ha. I said, "Yes, I have got the end." I'd thought it up in my bathroom, in my bath in the morning: the fight with the giant squid, with John Wayne, who'd come down to kill Ray Milland, and vice versa. Then the giant squid - with Ray Milland trying to save John Wayne's life, and all that. So I played John Wayne - under the sea, you remember, wholly under the sea in this wrecked ship - I played John Wayne, I played Ray Milland, and then I played the squid! And I put my arms out - tentacles, and everything like that. Anyway, it took me, I think, twenty minutes to play the end of the picture. Meanwhile, DeMille just sat there, completely rapt - just listening, utterly expressionless. It came to the end: silence until he would speak, and then he spoke. And he said, "Yes! Yes Charles. In Technicolor!" Ha, ha, ha! And the thing was sold, you know! The sequence cost about half a million, but it sold the picture. So that was it. Incidentally, on the subject of DeMille, I was awfully fond of that man. He was recognised in this town as a famous bully. I never found him a bully at all. I found him simply delightful to work with. In fact, we became personal friends. I used to go up to his ranch Paradise: six thousand feet up in the [?] there. Lovely, lovely, lovely old ranch where he, apparently - in the wilder Hollywood days - he used to give these big parties for everybody. Everybody in town would go up there and stay the night. There were peacocks and all sorts of things round there! It was lovely. I do remember a lovely occasion the first time I went up there, with him driving. We arrived up there, and there's this vast lawn in front of his ranch house. And along the lawn were about two or three hundred head of deer. I looked at this bewildering sight, and I said, "What is this? What's going on?" And he said, "Well, Charles, I'll tell you." He said, "It's the hunting season. I own about thirty miles of these mountains and right now during the entire hunting season I've got cowboys riding the range around armed to prevent anybody pursuing deer on the

my land. The deer know it, and have known it for years. So they all come as soon as the hunting season starts to my lawn!" He said, "That old guy there with the crumpled horn, he's an old friend of mine!" Now, this was not a bully. And that's partly why I loved the man. Oh, a lovely thing about him. He didn't live in the ranch house itself. He had his own little house down below, with his own little pool. From his own little house you had stone steps going down to the pool. And apparently whenever he was up there - even in midwinter - he'd go in the morning naked down to the pool for a swim and back. But, he told me that every day when he came down, and when he went back, there was a little cave beside the stone steps where lived a tarantula spider. He said, "Every morning when I come down, the tarantula spider comes out. I say 'Good morning' to him. He says 'Good Morning' to me, then goes back again. And then I have my swim, and when I go back it nods at me as I go!" Ha, ha, and that was it! An unusual man - as everybody else is.

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Arnold Schwartzman : Side Two continued: Charles Bennett, screenwriter. St. Patrick's Day - if I dare say it! - 17th March 1992. I'm joined by Stuart Birnbaum, who's a collaborator with Mr. Bennett...

Charles Bennett : ...And he's also my producer...

Arnold Schwartzman : ...And producer on the remake of 'Blackmail'. I will ask Mr. Birnbaum if he will kindly, from time to time, ask Mr. Bennett some questions, as he's quite an authority on Mr. Bennett's work. O.K.

Stuart Birnbaum : Well, in this er...

Charles Bennett : ...Don't be shy! Ha, ha!

Stuart Birnbaum : I am blushing - I don't know if you can hear that on the tape! This period in the '40s, in the early '40s, of films that you did which include 'Joan of Paris' and 'The Story of Doctor Wassell' that were made during the Second World War...

Charles Bennett : No, they weren't! They were the Second World War, but before America had come into it. That's the important point. The daring thing was that 20th Century Fox - no, not 20th Century Fox, R.K.O - R.K.O dared to make a picture like 'Joan of Paris', which was anti-Hitler, before... when America was a neutral country, before Japan came into the war. I think it was very daring, and a very good picture, by the way.

Stuart Birnbaum : My understanding is that the British government gave you a mandate to make these movies...

Charles Bennett : Yeah, but it was a secret mandate. After all, I mean, the whole point was that... Ian Hay - who became Major-General Ian Hay Beith - had said to me (I've still got the

letter) "Stay where you are, Charles. You're more good writing anti-Hitler... getting something into every picture you make. 'Cause your pictures are shown all over the world."

Stuart Birnbaum : In other words, while you were living and working in Hollywood and the war in Britain had started, you had wanted to make a contribution...

Charles Bennett : I'd wanted to go back. I wrote to... You see, the war broke out in the end of - when was it? - '39, and I wrote immediately... I heard immediately from the Consulate here that Ian Hay - who was a very fine writer, and a great, great playwright. He'd helped us enormously with some dialogue on 'The 39 Steps', and I knew him very well, and liked him very much. So, I wrote to him and said, "Look, I want to come back and do whatever I can." And then it was he wrote to me and said, "Sorry Charles. I'd love to have you over here, but you're going to be much more use to stay over there." He said, "Every picture you write - whatever it's about - try to get a little tiny bit of anti-Hitler into it, anti-German into it." So, that was it, and I think I did, heh!

Stuart Birnbaum : Well, I guess you were a kind of agent for the British weren't you?

Charles Bennett : Well, later I became a secret agent for the British, but that was...

Stuart Birnbaum : Well, tell us about that. I think you can tell us now!

Charles Bennett : I can tell you that now! When the war broke out there was a guy named Ian Cathcart-Jones who was one of the greatest flyers in the world. He had been in the MacRobertson race to Australia. He was in everything. He was the first man ever to land a plane on a ship at sea. He was in the navy - a commander in the navy - and he... he'd done a much worse thing than that, though. The British navy were somewhere in the Mediterranean and he flew over the admiral's ship and dropped - he didn't realise it was the admiral's ship - and dropped toilet rolls! There came down thousands and thousands and thousands, until the ship was... He very nearly got executed for that, you can imagine! Anyway, when the war broke out he was over here, and he became the head of the British secret service out here. He was our friend, a great friend of ours, and he said, "Look, I'm going down the west coast of Mexico. We're looking for places where the Germans can hide their submarines. Please, can you come with me?" I wished to God I could, but I couldn't - I was under contract to M.G.M. at that time, and it couldn't be done, so that was that. Time went on, and I kept vaguely in touch, but I was not working for the secret service at that time. And then I was writing for DeMille, and I think it was Dr. Wassell but I can't remember. It was about that time. I was working with this awfully good writer named Allan Le May. Anyway, I got this call from DeMille's office to come across, and I came across to his office. I was secretly taken in by his secretary - round the back, I think. I said, "What's going on?" And there he w

Arnold Schwartzman : there was the head of the F.B.I. - a terribly nice guy, whose name I forget at the moment - the head of American naval intelligence, and the head of the British spy system out here.

Stuart Birnbaum : This was here in Los Angeles?

Charles Bennett : Yes. So, then DeMille said...What nobody has ever realised or known is that DeMille was an instigator against Hitler and was right in there with the secret service in all two countries. Anyway, from that moment on I was in it.

Stuart Birnbaum : Excuse me, but this meeting took place where?

Charles Bennett : In DeMille's office. Then they would give me assignments to do. And believe me, the most thankless thing in the world is to get a secret service assignment, because all they say is something utterly stupid like - it isn't stupid, but it seems to be stupid - it says... this German writer, so-and-so (I'm not going to mention his name at the moment; I think he's dead, so it doesn't matter, but anyway...) we want to know if there's a picture hanging in his house. You wouldn't believe the problem I had getting in to that man's house! I had to get on to Curt Siodmak - who you know, by the way - and he knew the guy. And I said, "I want to get to know him." He said, "Yes? Well he plays tennis." I said, "Fine! So do I." So Curt arranged for me to meet him there; this is the way to get into his house. I arranged for us to meet, to go down to the West Side tennis club to play tennis. There he was waiting for me outside the house, you know, heh, heh! It took me three weeks to get into the house - and there was the picture. So I told all these frightfully important secret service people exactly where the picture was. All I got was, "Thank you. Here's another job you can do..." It went on like that. You never got any thanks. I imagine it was in, oh, 1987, I was staying in the Savage Club, just at the south end of Berkeley Square. The back of it is the real headquarters of the British secret service. I thought, well, supposing I walk in there and say, "I used to be a member of you," they'd say, "Never heard of you!" Ha, ha! But that's it: that's the kind of thing it remained at. What a bore I am! Heh, heh!

Stuart Birnbaum : I was wondering: did you ever find out why they wanted to know about the picture?

Charles Bennett : No! They never tell you anything. No, no, no, no! Stuart, there were a dozen things I was asked to do, but you never get any information. Your only... is "Thank you: that was fine. Will you do this so-and-so-and-so-and-so..." So, I did it.

Stuart Birnbaum : Was this German writer suspected of being a - dare I say - Nazi?

Charles Bennett : Oh, he was everything. He was a Nazi, a horribly, horribly important Nazi, yes.

Stuart Birnbaum : You told me once that during the war you had a party - I think at the house - and the Nazi secret service was there?

Charles Bennett : That's true.

Stuart Birnbaum : Tell us about it.

Charles Bennett : I knew a lovely lady who lived - actually she was terribly, terribly rich. Her people owned fifty markets, and things like that, all over America. She was lovely - she asked me to marry her, but I didn't! Anyway, she was terribly, terribly attractive, but her people had

owned the most famous hotel in Hamburg - can't remember what it was called - on the lake at Hamburg. You probably know it?

Arnold Schwartzman : The Atlantic? I think that's the one.

Charles Bennett : Could be. Anyway, her people owned that, and she was wildly pro-Hitler. I mean, she was living here in America, she was an American. But she was wildly pro-Hitler. She'd been brought up in Germany, and part of my secret service work, I hate to say, was to play poker with her every Saturday night and to ingratiate myself with her, and to get to know her. So I gave a very large party here one night, with 150 or 200 people. Among them was a Baron something-or-other - I can't remember. He was a German baron, and head of the German secret service. The British Consul-General, named Duff, was here and I said to him - Eric Duff - I said, "Look, the head of the German secret service is here. I think you ought to meet him! He won't know that you'll know he's the German secret service, and it will help." He said, "No! No Charles! Couldn't possibly, no!" Ha, ha! He was shocked at the whole idea. I thought it was stupid because the only way if you're mixed up with that kind of thing - your enemies - is to get to know anybody. I'm doing the same thing right now with a gentleman who is trying to take a beautiful lady I know for something like \$5 million. He's a very unpleasant English homosexual, and... not because he's a homosexual, but he's unpleasant. He's doing his best, but I'm remaining a friend of everybody, because the only way to get any information... if you once declare yourself an enemy, you're done for. Yes?

Stuart Birnbaum : Well, what they say about counter-intelligence: it's like riding a bike.

Charles Bennett : Riding a what?

Stuart Birnbaum : Riding a bicycle. You never forget.

Charles Bennett : You do! D'you know, I was down at La Quinta, and I thought, "I'll ride a bicycle again!" I got on the bicycle, and fell off on the other side, heh, heh, heh!

Arnold Schwartzman : Did any of your spy exploits give you any inspiration for any of your scripts?

Charles Bennett : No. I wouldn't think so: no, quite frankly. No, no, it had nothing to do with my scripts. This was a little thing on the side. Don't forget that I was writing scripts all the time; part of the time directing, and doing very well, thank you! But this was a job on the side - a very secret job, too. And nobody knew it, except a very few people. Fine! Is that what you want?

Stuart Birnbaum : I'm sure, yes.

Arnold Schwartzman : Did we actually cover your First World War experience, because I believe you were distinguished by being decorated in the First World War?

Charles Bennett : Yes, I was.

Arnold Schwartzman : Where was that? Was it in Europe?

Charles Bennett : Where do you think it was? In Japan? Ha, ha, ha!

Arnold Schwartzman : I'm only trying to draw an answer out of you Charles!

Charles Bennett : No, I joined the army when I was seventeen - 1917 that was. By the time I was eighteen I was in France, in the trenches, fighting Germans, you know. ([?] is a German name, of course, heh!) I was fighting Germans, and... oh, I don't know. I went "over the top." "Over the top" was a very dangerous, very unpleasant thing to do, because you had to go into the teeth of machine gun and shell fire and things like that. Usually about half the battalion would survive, and that kind of stuff, you know. On September 1st 1918 I went "over the top." It was a place called... can't remember. Doesn't matter. It was stupid! About 25 of us got ahead of the battalion and the battalion settled down in trenches behind us - blown up trenches. The whole of the Somme, of course, was nothing but blown up trenches. Anyway, they settled down there and we were about 150 yards ahead of them. They didn't know we were there, but the Germans did. And the Germans had machine guns. Not only machine guns, but they'd got light artillery, and - we were cracked, we were - they were spotting us. Any movement amongst us in our shell holes - you know, there were all these shell holes - and... I wasn't gallant at all, only, what happened was that there was a guy in the next shell hole, and he was obviously dying. He was in agony, he was in terrible trouble: he'd been shot. And eventually I got up out of my shell hole - where I was commanding a Lewis gun, by the way, by that time - and I came across this open land: about ten yards down to his shell hole. The guy was lying there with his head in a puddle, you know, breathing. So I started to get him out, at which point my captain - a delightful man named Captain Knight - who was in another shell hole just behind us, said, "Bennett! Get back to your shell hole!" I said, "Sir! Let me try to help this poor guy." He said, "The Germans can see you, and you are drawing fire." Which they were: these artillery guns were just concentrating on us so. I said, "Sir, I want to try to help him..." He said, "Get back to your shell hole!" And he drew his gun on me! He said, "Either you get back to your shell hole now or I'll shoot you dead!" He said, "You're endangering all of us." So, I said, "All right sir." Well, I had to, I had to. I got back to my shell hole. This guy died later during the night. Twice during the night Captain Knight sent men to get back to the battalion behind us, and twice they didn't get through, either of them. Both dead, I suppose. And eventually Captain Knight decided to go himself. And he... he must have got through, or else it would be a very different story. The London Scottish came "over the top" the following morning, finding us there, and swept on after the Germans. We got out. I was a very happy man, and things like that. We came down to a little village, and it was simply heaven. About ten days later nothing had happened: it was wonderful. Except I was by that time a corporal. Two things here are very important about being a corporal: it was my job to give the men their rum issue. We had a daily rum issue, you see, so there was a little guy there who to me - I was only eighteen - seemed to be about eighty, but I think he was probably only about 32 or something like that! He'd been a cobbler in England - shoes and things like that. He hated me, and then he accused me of stealing the men's rum - that I was drinking the men's rum. I wasn't actually, but I did go into this village, the next village, with the sergeant and another corporal, and we got very, very drunk on red wine, and when we came back this was the proof! "This guy steals our rum, and gets drunk on our rum!" Fine! Anyway, the following day - I knew damn well he intended to report me, and that kind of thing - the following day I got a message to come

across to company headquarters, which was all tented and everything. So I said, "Oh, Christ, this is it! I'm really in trouble." So I came across, and there was a young captain, a new one. A delightful guy! He looked at me and extended his hand! Shaking hands with a captain was not done. I did it, and said "Yes?" He said, "Congratulations! You've been recommended for the military medal for bravery in the field." I said, "Bravery in the field?!" He said, "Yes. Captain Knight..." "I thought he was dead!" He said, "No, he survived. He's in hospital, and he recommended..."

-----Tape ends abruptly-----

Tape 2, side 1 (17/03/92)

Stuart Birnbaum : Well, before we get off the subject of the First World War, your compatriots in your group had a nickname for you...?

Charles Bennett : Oh, yes! It's an old nickname, heh, heh! In those days - I don't know why, but... - I had a gold tooth up on the side, so I was known as the - by my compatriots - as the GTC; which meant: "Gold Toothed Cunt!" Ha, ha! And also, I was known as "Old Gussy" - Gussy who'd swallowed a dictionary, you see. Because I knew words that they - the cockneys - didn't know. And even later when I was created a Second Lieutenant on the field - on the battlefield - I was still Lieutenant "Gussy" Bennett! Heh, heh, heh!

Stuart Birnbaum : You told me: "Old Gus Bennett."

Charles Bennett : "Gus" Bennett, that's right...

Stuart Birnbaum : ...who ate a dictionary.

Charles Bennett : "Gus" Bennett who'd swallowed a dictionary. Ha, ha! "Old Gus" Bennett, at the age of seventeen, who'd swallowed a dictionary!

Stuart Birnbaum : Do you remember which... what film was your directorial debut?

Charles Bennett : Terrible! It was awful. It was a picture with Margaret Lockwood. I was supposed to direct 'The Trial of Madeleine Smith', and everybody was set for me to do this. You see, I'd been there during the war - I was writing for the Ministry of Information. This was the Second War - not the World War, not the Crimean! I was writing for them, and Laurence Olivier - who was a very great friend of mine - said, "Look, I wish you'd write 'The Trial of Madeleine Smith.' I want to direct it." So, I wrote it as a starring part for him and for Leigh... whats-a-name, his wife?

Stuart Birnbaum : Vivien Leigh.

Charles Bennett : Vivien Leigh! Anyway, it was all very wonderful, and then I got word from London - I was back here - saying that Larry couldn't do it - he was doing something else and so forth. But they said would I do it, would I direct it. My contract with them was that I wrote a movie for Rank, and I wrote and directed another movie for Rank. It was a contract, so fine. I was very happy about that. I loved the script; I still love it - it's never been made. But the next thing that happened was, just as I was about to go over there to direct 'The Trial of Madeleine Smith', I got word that David Lean - wonderful director; his wife played in 'The Painted Veil' [N.B. 'The Seventh Veil']. What was her name? I can't remember. Anyway, she wanted to play Madeleine Smith. So my script went out, and they made it. It was a flop - ha, ha! - but that's beside the point. The fact remains that they landed me with a horrible story. In fact I'd never read the story until I got to England, across the Atlantic. I thought, "This is awful, awful!" But I wrote the script - for which I was paid quite a lot of money - then I directed it. I think my direction was extremely good, but there was nothing you could do with that story. It was awful!

Stuart Birnbaum : Do you remember what it was called?

Charles Bennett : Yes, of course I do. It was called... I can't remember at the moment; it'll come back in a minute...

Stuart Birnbaum : David Lean directed the other picture?

Charles Bennett : He directed the other picture, and it was a flop, yes.

Stuart Birnbaum : When would this have been?

Charles Bennett : 1947 or '48 - a long time ago, you see.

Stuart Birnbaum : When did you get a chance to direct another film?

Charles Bennett : Another film of mine was here, and it was so bad. The budget was \$176,000. You can imagine making a full feature for \$176,000! It starred Lew Ayres, and that was all. I don't know how much he got - I got very little. And it was dreadful! I had a ten day shooting schedule.

Stuart Birnbaum : Ten days?!

Charles Bennett : Ten days. I got it in, but it was dreadful, and I'm not even going to mention its title. But, later, very soon later, I became a TV director for Edward Small - who was very important in those days. Oh, I remember a lovely thing. The first of the 'Monte Cristo' features - not features, no - TV features, to be made in conjunction with Sir Lew Grade, no, Grade, in England, was made here, and I directed it. At the end of it, I remember Leon Fromkess - who was the head of the company - coming in, and he said, "My God! Do you know you're running about ten hours over?!" I said, "Well, I'm sorry about that." But Edward Small looked at it and said, "This is the only guy who knows how to direct this kind of stuff" - I mean ... 'Monte Cristo'. So I was transferred to England, where I stayed for a year - and had a wonderful time, by the way! Ha, ha!

Stuart Birnbaum : When was that?

Charles Bennett : 1955. It was fun! And this awfully nice guy, George Dolenz, who was... I'd met George Dolenz, strangely enough, at... what's that lovely place, south of Tijuana?

Stuart Birnbaum : Ensenada?

Charles Bennett : Ensenada. There was a lovely hotel there, about 1937 or '38. It was the only hotel, the only big one...

Stuart Birnbaum : ...it's still there...

Charles Bennett : ... and it was run... is it?

Stuart Birnbaum : Yeah.

Charles Bennett : It was run like a European hotel, it was simply heavenly. We even dressed for dinner, and that kind of thing. Anyway, Maggie and I - my then adorable wife was with me. And the maître d'hôtel, who was simply superb - he was always bowing and that kind of thing: "Yes Mr. And Mrs. Bennett, yes, your table is ready..." and so on, and so forth. After dinner, as I went out, he'd say, "Meet you at the greenhouse?" Or whatever that was called. I'd say, "Yes." He became my friend, this maître de. He used to ride horses with me every morning on miles of those wonderful sands at Ensenada. Then he came up here and became a maître d'hôtel at Mocambo, the big nightclub on Sunset Boulevard. There he was spotted by Howard Hughes, who said, "This guy should be a film star!" So he starred him in a couple of pictures - I can't remember what their names were - and he was on his way to becoming very important. And then Edward Small picked him up for ... 'Monte Cristo', and things like that. He owned a restaurant, a lovely restaurant on Sunset, and one day he had a heart attack and fell off the roof, and that was the end of him! But, no, from a direction point of view... Then I was sent back there to direct a series with J. Carrol Naish - who I think was one of the most unpleasant men I've ever met in my life! Irishman! Ha, ha! He hated the English because he was an Irishman - of Irish parentage, anyway - and he was my leading man: Charlie Chan. God, how I hated it!

Stuart Birnbaum : You know, I'd love if you'd tell us a little bit about Mocambo. Tell us a little bit about those nightclubs and nightspots that were so much a part of Hollywood history. You may have been to...

Charles Bennett : In those days - I'm talking about the late '30s, into the '40s, and, I suppose, into the '50s, yes - the Sunset Boulevard was almost comparable to... well, not the Champs Elysees, but, I mean, to lovely places in Paris and London, things like that. You'd got the Trocadero, which died: a beautiful nightclub. And Mocambo, and Ciro's. And these were all wonderful nightclubs, beautiful nightclubs. At Mocambo you'd get all the top singers in the world coming and performing there, and things like that. It was so lovely there: beautiful dancebands - it always had beautiful dancebands. You'd go in there... you couldn't go in there on Saturday except in a dinner jacket, or full white tie, and that kind of stuff. It was a very different world to what it is now - what the Sunset Strip is now. Anyway, I used to love it. You'd go in

there, you'd dance. And then at two o'clock in the morning the lights would go down and the bands would play 'Dancing in the Dark!' Heh, heh! And you danced in the dark, and you kissed your girlfriend, and it was very, very nice. That was the way it was.

Stuart Birnbaum : You told me a marvellous story a few weeks ago which culminated in you running into Errol Flynn, I believe, at one of these clubs. The story, if you recall, was about that rascal who...

Charles Bennett : Freddie McEvoy?

Stuart Birnbaum : Yeah, yeah. Would you tell us that story?

Charles Bennett : Didn't I tell you that the other day? Oh, Freddie McEvoy...

Stuart Birnbaum : It's a great story.

Charles Bennett : It's a horrible story! When Hitchcock and I used to go to St. Moritz - to the Palace Hotel in St. Moritz - back in the '30s when we were doing all those pictures like 'The 39 Steps', and things like that, this was the most fashionable place in Europe. And there was this tremendously handsome, beautiful, magnificent creature named Frederick McEvoy, who was actually being kept by the woman who was the half owner of... Standard New Jersey - immense, immense money. And he was wonderful: he was the greatest skier, and... the bobsleigh run, which was the most dangerous line in the world, he was the Olympic champion on the bobsleigh run at St. Moritz. He was simply terrific, this guy. Anyway, I got to know him then, but then the war came. One day I was on the terrace at the West Side tennis club. And there was Errol Flynn, and Errol Flynn was Freddie McEvoy's closest friend. Errol saw me and said, "Charles, come across, come across! Come and have a drink." So, I came across, and he said, "Of course, you know Freddie?" Freddie had had his back to me, and he turned. And this shock was in his face because he was wanted by the British government for having not only walked out and not joined the army as he should have as a Colonel or a General, or whatever, but because he was also known to be a pro-Hitler agent. He looked at me and, then he smiled and said, "Charles, how wonderful to meet you!" So we all drank together, and things like that. Time went on...No! Time didn't go on! By that time he knew that I was associated with the secret service. So, next day I was sitting here in this house, out in the garden. I'd been working and I walked out in the garden, just sitting there. And a bullet came by my head - shot from somewhere up on that hill there! I didn't like that, ha! So I came in, you know.... The fact remains that I can't say that Freddie McEvoy was anything to do with the bullet. It could have been a hunter - there were deer around here in those days, you know. But, the fact remains that the next day he got across the border into Mexico, and never appeared again in America until the war finished. Anyway, the war finished. I was in Cannes. Glenn Ford was playing in a picture of mine called The Green Glove and we were shooting in the south of France. I was there and - it was so lovely in those days: you still had to dress smartly, and you couldn't go in there except in a dinner jacket. There, of course, was Freddie McEvoy: magnificent, as usual. Richer, richer now than ever, because the woman who'd been keeping him had married him, and then given him \$4 million just for a divorce. Barbara Hutton was keeping him too at the same time, and had given him millions. And he had the most beautiful yacht in the Mediterranean - right there in the harbour at Cannes. He was so charming

meeting me, and he said, "Charles, you've got to come and have dinner on my yacht. It's so nice there." I knew about the yacht because apparently the dinners were lovely, and they had a crew of eleven, by the way, and he had a couple of bagpipers who used to wander around the deck [imitates instrument's sound] bagpiping all the time. Anyway, thank God I had to go back to America at that time. So, I didn't go. Three or four weeks later Freddie McEvoy took off in his yacht, and for once in his life he had met a lovely, lovely, lovely Paris model. And so he married this Paris model. I mean, it was the first time in his life he hadn't been kept by a multi-millionaire, and things like that. Anyway, the yacht wrecked off the north-west corner of Africa. Somehow the crew of eleven managed to get to the shore, but Freddie was left on the yacht with his lovely, lovely wife. So, after a while, apparently - I mean, nobody knows exactly - he said, "Well, we've got to get out of here. The yacht's going down. We've got to swim for it - about 200 yards." So they took off across to the beach. About 100 yards out the wife called, "Freddie, Freddie! Help me, help me - I can't make it!" He turned back to help her, and they both drowned. And that was it. Now, the sequel is that a few... oh, I suppose a few months later, or a few weeks later; months later, I suppose - I was in a lovely Italian restaurant along the Sunset Boulevard. There was Errol Flynn, with Bruce Cabot. I came in and Errol said, "Charles, how nice to see you! Join us." So I joined them, and we talked about a lot of things and, eventually, Freddie McEvoy's name came up. Freddie McEvoy was the closest friend in the world of Errol Flynn - let's make that quite clear. Anyway, his name came up, and I said, "Well, there's one thing one has to say about Freddie: my God, he died very gallantly." And Bruce Cabot said, "What?!" I said, "He died very gallantly." Bruce said, "What do you mean 'gallantly?'" I said, "Well, he turned back to rescue his wife and drowned!" He said, "Christ almighty Charles! Do you think he'd have turned back if it hadn't been for that \$100,000 dollar necklace on her neck!" Ha, ha, ha! And Errol laughed - Errol, his closest friend, laughed! That was it. Ha, ha, ha!

-----Abrupt cut in recording-----

Charles Bennett : Ah, that lovely, lovely, lovely lady, what was her name? She was the star of one of the earliest of the talking pictures. An Irishwoman... Anyway, doesn't matter. She gave a big dinner party - she was playing in a show I was doing, with Carrol Naish. She was married to a highly important literary agent in London, and they gave a big dinner party for me and my executive producer - a delightful guy named Rudolph Flothow - and that kind of thing. And with them was this little woman - a Jewish lady - a delightful person who was the top correspondent of the Hollywood Reporter out here. She lived in New York and that kind of thing. So, anyway, there was Carrol Naish, and during dinner he was sitting next to this lady. And he was getting drunker and drunker. And presently he turned to her and said, "Oh, you fucking little Jewish bitch!" He said, "Nobody'd speak to you except they want their name in the Hollywood Reporter!" So, I said to him, "Carrol, hey, hey, hey! You're overstepping yourself a bit. Hold your tongue!" He said, "Oh, fuck you too!" and that sort of thing. And, anyway, that was it: he was never my friend from then on! Heh, heh, heh! Anyway, I was very glad when he died! Ha, ha, ha!

-----Abrupt cut in recording-----

Charles Bennett : ...I also think that it will be made eventually, but the trouble of Hollywood at the moment is the economic situation, and you never know where you're going. And now it's entirely up to Stuart and William to see what they can do about it. I mean, if we can get the right director and a star who'll need little, the picture can't [sic] go along... Do you agree?

Stuart Birnbaum : I agree, and we will!

Charles Bennett : Hmmm?

Stuart Birnbaum : And we will.

Charles Bennett : You think you will? That's nice. Arnold Schwartzman: Do you think Kenneth Branagh would be good for that?

Stuart Birnbaum : I think he might - he's very busy.

Charles Bennett : Who?

Arnold Schwartzman : Kenneth Branagh.

Stuart Birnbaum : He has two pictures to do. He got a great deal of attention when his film 'Dead Again' - rather surprisingly - did very well.

Charles Bennett : Did it?

Stuart Birnbaum : Yes, it did.

Arnold Schwartzman : That's what made me think of him, because it's in that sort of genre.

Stuart Birnbaum : It's an old-fashioned story, a thriller. I don't know whether Charles discussed how we came to collaborate on this project together?

Arnold Schwartzman : I don't think he did actually.

Stuart Birnbaum : Well, from my point of view, my partner in this project was a fella named William Blaylock. William and I were students at the University of Southern California film school together twenty years ago...

Charles Bennett : Were you clean-shaven in those days?

Stuart Birnbaum : I was clean-shaven, but my hair was very, very long! It made up for it.

Charles Bennett : Heh, heh!

Stuart Birnbaum : And William and I saw this marvellous film 'Blackmail', which was presented to us as England's first talking film, and an old Hitchcock classic. We enjoyed it very much. I remember, in fact - I don't know if I ever told you this - I asked my cinema professor to let me have the copy of the film, and I took it home, rented a 16mm projector, and saw it again and again.

Charles Bennett : You didn't tell me that, no.

Stuart Birnbaum : I found something interesting - I'm not sure we ever discussed this - but when I was looking at the film at home I was able to stop and freeze the frame of the print as it would run, and would do it occasionally when certain images caught my attention. There's a scene, which I'm sure you remember, when in the beginning of the story the protagonist Frank Webber, the homicide detective at Scotland Yard arrests...

Charles Bennett : He was named Harold in those days, ha, ha!

Stuart Birnbaum : Harold - right, from the play! - who later became Frank, but, nonetheless, was the hero of the story. They made an arrest, and the first ten or fifteen minutes of the film is the arrest and the booking of this hardened criminal. At a certain point during the booking process somebody flips through the pages of the... what do you call it? Of the criminals? The big book that's got every criminal face in it, looking for his face.

Charles Bennett : They find the face.

Stuart Birnbaum : And they find his face, but one of the faces that Hitchcock put in this book was a young, rising politician named Adolf Hitler!

Charles Bennett : Really?! I never realised that!

Stuart Birnbaum : I went back, and I said, "That looks very strange," and I went back, and sure enough if you freeze the frame on one of the pages there - and this is 1929, so he certainly was a controversial figure, but...

Charles Bennett : Why did Hitch... why'd he never tell me that?

Stuart Birnbaum : I dunno, I dunno, but it's remarkable. Anyway, so I really loved this film...

Unidentified interviewer: Who would you do now? Whose face would you sneak in now?

Stuart Birnbaum : Probably yours Charles!

Charles Bennett : Mine, of course! Ha, ha, ha!

Stuart Birnbaum : That other notorious tyrant, the scourge of seven continents!

Charles Bennett : About to take over the entire United States! Ha, ha!

Stuart Birnbaum : Anyway, twenty years later, William and I were talking about 'Blackmail' again, and we decided to look into the rights for the film, and discovered that the picture was so old that the rights had reverted to the underlying material, which was the play by a gentleman named Charles Bennett. And then we went looking for the agent representing the estate of Mr. Bennett, and discovered, to our horror, that he was still walking among us! Ha, ha!

Charles Bennett : Horror?!

Stuart Birnbaum : To our delight, to our utter delight! It's at that point that we made a deal. We optioned the rights to your play and the project was set up at 20th Century Fox.

Charles Bennett : They found I was alive! Heh, heh!

Stuart Birnbaum : Very much alive!

Unidentified Interviewer: And the price went up, did it?

Charles Bennett : No, it didn't!

Stuart Birnbaum : Not yet, but the night is young!

Unidentified interviewer: What stage are you at now?

Stuart Birnbaum : Well, what happened was the studio had us go out and find a couple of writers. We happened to select a writing team of two younger men who did a draft of 'Blackmail', and I had some problems with it. Charles asked me if he could read it, and I said, "Absolutely." We had become friends during the year or so that it had taken from the time when it first started. And then he called and asked if I would like his notes. We were delighted, and three or four days later he had delivered a forty-two page manuscript, which was not just a critique of the script, but a reconstruction of how it should be done. It was exactly right! And everyone agreed, including the studio...

Charles Bennett : ...except the writers...

Stuart Birnbaum : ...except for the writers. And then, luckily for us, the studio invited us to write it together. So...

Charles Bennett : ...that was it. So we've got a good script, and I think that... oh, I don't know. It's a funny industry, the film industry. But I think it'll work, you know, quite frankly. I'm optimistic, and so is he.

Stuart Birnbaum : Yes, I am.

Charles Bennett : He's more than optimistic!

Arnold Schwartzman : Do you see it as... is it an expensive film to make?

Stuart Birnbaum : Well, that entirely depends on...

Charles Bennett : That entirely depends on the star!

Stuart Birnbaum : ...on what you term "above-the-line..."

Charles Bennett : No, when you get Harold Landis [sic] getting \$6 million to direct this Basic Instinct, and you get a lot of \$8 million or \$10 million for a star, that's where the money goes, you see. It isn't the - am I right? - it isn't the cost of the production, it's the cost of the stars.

Arnold Schwartzman : That as well.

Unidentified interviewer: Would it be right to make it in black and white?

Charles Bennett : No, no.

Stuart Birnbaum : Well, that just couldn't happen today. The problem with black and white films is not that the audiences wouldn't respond to them, because they still do when they are irregularly produced, but the theatre owners - people who carry the pictures - fiercely object to it, believing that there patrons won't come. So, it makes it very difficult. Woody Allen gets away with it because no one can object! He has that right. But, generally speaking, it isn't done. Not in Hollywood, anyway.

Charles Bennett : It has to be colour now.

Stuart Birnbaum : The script that we made wasn't... certain films should be in black and white, but this one needn't be. It's a colourful drama.

Arnold Schwartzman : And is it set today?

Stuart Birnbaum : It's set in contemporary Washington D.C.

Arnold Schwartzman : Oh, so it's transposed from the U.K. to...

Charles Bennett : It's the same story, but it's now brought up to date, yes.

Stuart Birnbaum : What's interesting about it as a remake is that, you know, it's always a good question why somebody would want to make an old film, and usually it's for the wrong reasons.

One shouldn't, I think, try to remake a great classic, something that's really untouchable. But, in the case of 'Blackmail', there were two important factors. One is that the film was originally shot as a silent film, and then was later amended somewhat, and they reshot certain scenes and they dubbed it over, and the first fifteen minutes of the movie are silent, with music over it, and so it's so old. And the second and most important factor is that the story is very good, and...

Charles Bennett : I think you're right: the story's a good story!

Stuart Birnbaum : Yes, and, I mean, that's really it. And although that's often the case with old films, sometimes they don't translate. But in this special case the moral imperative that drives the plot - which is, at its core, a woman who is being raped murders, or kills, in defending herself the man who's attempting to kill [sic] her, then flees the crime etc. etc. - well, it's as valid today as 64 years ago when Charles wrote the play. That's not always the case. Usually you have to monkey with that: you take an old story, you've got to revamp the morality of it. So, anyway, that's the story of 'Blackmail'.

Charles Bennett : I think that's probably... I can't think of anything else in my life, except the fact that I'm getting older, heh, heh!

Arnold Schwartzman : And wiser!

Charles Bennett : And what?

Arnold Schwartzman : Wiser.

Charles Bennett : Wiser?!

Arnold Schwartzman : Wiser! Wise.

Charles Bennett : Wiser in only certain degrees. I mean, yes, I've given up women! Ha, ha, ha!

Arnold Schwartzman : Bad move, bad move!

-----Abrupt cut in recording-----

Charles Bennett : ...a favourite picture of mine.

Stuart Birnbaum : This is which film?

Charles Bennett : 'Ivy'. I adored Joan Fontaine, and all my old friends like Cedric Hardwicke and Herbert Marshall. They were all in it. I got all my friends together and we made the picture. I liked the picture very much. I thought it was very good. And, I don't know, it didn't succeed as much as it should have. That's the game: you don't know.

Arnold Schwartzman : And what about 'Madness of the Heart'?

Charles Bennett : That was, again, I think a good story. My favourite actor in the world was Claude Rains. But unfortunately he got killed after the first reel. I mean, that's terrible to kill off your favourite actor at the end of the first reel!

Arnold Schwartzman : But you didn't write that one, you only directed it...

Charles Bennett : Yes, I wrote it.

Arnold Schwartzman : That's what I was going to say! I thought you wrote it as well. You killed him off!

Charles Bennett : What could I do?! I mean, that was the story: he had to die, you see. But anyway, it was taken over by Mitchum. Mitchum and - what was her name, I can't remember.

Stuart Birnbaum : Tell us about Orson Welles and 'Black Magic'.

Charles Bennett : That was terrible! Do you want to hear that?

Arnold Schwartzman : Yes, go on.

Charles Bennett : Somebody had said to Eddy Small, who was a gloriously ignorant, incompetent, but wonderful character, that there was a character named Cagliostro, and that this would make a good picture. He didn't know who Cagliostro was, so, anyway, he called me in. I wrote a movie story about Cagliostro, all mixed up with the famous stealing of the jewels and things like that of... I don't remember. Doesn't matter. What was her name, the king's mistress?

Arnold Schwartzman : Which king?

Charles Bennett : The French king. Doesn't matter, doesn't matter. I wrote the script and everybody wanted to play it, it was wonderful! The script was apparently very good, and so Edward Small... Eventually they decided on... what's his name?

Stuart Birnbaum : Orson Welles?

Charles Bennett : Orson Welles - to play the lead. And so Orson Welles and the director - whose name I also forget at the moment - took off for Italy. Eddy Small wouldn't fly the Atlantic. No, no, it was dangerous. So they all had a wonderful time in Rome, where Orson Welles decided to write the script - rewrite it. He rewrote the script, and the director, who thought Orson was wonderful, listened and by the time the film came back here it was unintelligible, it was unshottable [sic]. It was awful! It couldn't be put together, you see. So, the awful thing was that now they called me in and said, "Charles, you've got to do something about this. You've got to make this thing into common sense." So, I spent four nights at U.A., at night there, directing scenes I'd written in order to make this thing even cuttable - even editable, you know. But the lovely thing was that there was Orson, the awesome Orson, and I said to Orson

before we started, "Listen, this picture can't be cut together the way you people have done it over there. Will you please do these little scenes which I've written, and which I'll be directing, which makes it possible. And he said - I remember, it was so wonderful - he drew himself up to his tremendous height of about six foot, and said, "Charles, I'm a very good soldier. I will do what I'm told!" Ha, ha! And he did. I shot for about three or four nights, and he was wonderful. The picture was put together - it was still a mess, as far as I'm concerned. I think it's a good mess, but it's a mess. It's what it could have been, but isn't...

-----Abrupt cut in recording-----

Arnold Schwartzman : 'Where Danger Lives'?

Charles Bennett : Oh, I thought it was a good picture. But, quite frankly, I have nothing to say about it.

Arnold Schwartzman : Okay. 'No Escape'?

Charles Bennett : Oh, Christ, forget it!

Arnold Schwartzman : 'The Story of Mankind'?

Charles Bennett : Forget it!

Arnold Schwartzman : 'The Lost World'?

Charles Bennett : Forget it!

Arnold Schwartzman : 'Five Weeks in a Balloon'?

Charles Bennett : Not bad.

Arnold Schwartzman : 'War Gods of the Deep'?

Charles Bennett : Awful!

Stuart Birnbaum : You're forgetting 'Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea'...

Charles Bennett : I have it, by the way, now.

Stuart Birnbaum : ...which was a good film.

Charles Bennett : I didn't think so.

Stuart Birnbaum : Well, it was certainly memorable to an entire generation of young people...

Charles Bennett : Who cares about young people!

Stuart Birnbaum : That's a very good point! Possibly a closing point.

Arnold Schwartzman : Okay. Anyway, many thanks Charles.

Charles Bennett : Fine, fine. I'm delighted.

Arnold Schwartzman : It's very timely, because we're coming to the end of this tape.

Charles Bennett : I'm... are we off the air now?

Arnold Schwartzman : On behalf of Her Majesty - ha, ha! - and Great Britain, we thank you.