

## The William Desmond Taylor Case

\* Excerpted from *Mabel Normand: A Source Book to Her Life and Films*

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*"Before we can make any accurate speculations of the causes and guilt of those involved we must know something of the community in which the victim lived and in which he died. It is my first contention that the murder itself and its consequent lack of solution had its roots deeply buried in the inner character of the community. I am convinced of this. I was there!"*

~ King Vidor, private papers

The murder of Paramount film director William Desmond Taylor in Feb. 1922 had not only an impact of crucial importance on Mabel Normand's life, but on Hollywood, and, in turn, the nation itself. Since taking place, there have and will probably never cease to be baffling mysteries surrounding the case, not least of which, of course, the identity of the killer. Despite this, it is not impossible on the basis of what evidence there is available to reconstruct a plausible scenario that might *better* explain most, if not all, of what happened -- this thanks in no small part due to the priceless and prodigious research of first King Vidor, and later Taylor specialist, Bruce Long. What follows here is an attempt at such. This is not to say that all or any particular of what is offered as explanation is necessary to account for what happened, but only that it is as likely an accounting as any heretofore to come forward. Most especially when dealing with something as puzzling and difficult as the Taylor mystery, it is, needless to say, possible that I am entirely wrong on a given point of speculation or surmise. So that this admitted, I am more than happy to be introduced to new facts and or compelling counter arguments. Whether such are forthcoming, what ensues here is at minimum a framework on which to build a more expanded and intelligent assessment of the case and some of its key aspects.

The following examination and conjecture does not pretend to cover every possible point of controversy but only some of the more prominent ones. It assumes some elementary and general knowledge of the case on the part of the reader, which knowledge, and beyond what is already contained in this Mabel Normand Source Book, can be found in Sidney Kirkpatrick's *A Cast of Killers* and Bruce Long's *William Desmond Taylor: a dossier*, and *Taylorology* series.<sup>1</sup>

### Who Was William Desmond Taylor?

Despite numerous post-murder suspicions and rumors, sometimes of a sinister nature and none of which has been proven true, Taylor -- compared to most men -- could reasonably be characterized as a fundamentally conscientious and "good" or high minded man. This is important I believe because it more than likely helps to tell us who his killer was. The initial reaction to his death was one of almost universal disbelief among those who knew him. In interviews, time and again, these associates and work fellows of his expressed bafflement as to who would have wanted to kill him. Practically all not only spoke well, but indeed highly of him, as a conscientious, hard working, artist, intellectual and idealist. As well, the portrait we get is of someone concerned both with protecting films from outside censorship, while nevertheless maintaining that film makers need to be conscious about their role in protecting public morals -- particularly those of young people. His purported forging of antiques when living in New York, recently uncovered by author Charles Higham and his subsequent and mysterious leaving of his wife and daughter in to avoid prosecution on this charge, and assuming them true, are about as bad as anything we know about him with certainty. Yet even these in turn can be reasonably dismissed as isolated errors of his youth, rather than hard proof the depraved character suggested later by yellow journalists and fault seeking gossip. His being a not infrequent loner and taciturn man, as sometimes described, may have put some people off, and made him more vulnerable. But this, in and of itself, could hardly be considered grounds for incurring someone's hatred. It is possible that his involvement with women may have incurred the wrath and jealousy of others, but even granting this, it does not necessarily mean that he himself had done anything wrong per se; only that another had possibly believed he had done so.

Probably one of the more accurate written portraits of Taylor is the following that appeared immediately after his death:

\* from *Los Angeles Record*, February 2, 1922

*Taylor, the man, was for business first. There was no mistaking that part of his nature.*

*His tiny mahogany desk, which was placed against the front of the house, was littered with letters, canceled checks and bills.*

*That he lived to himself was noted by the many personal things that surrounded him. He was a man of modest taste. Even though he was rich and his house luxuriously furnished, there was no sign of extravagance, gaudiness or show about his abode.*

*A copy of Floyd Dells' "Moon Calf," with a hand-painted ribbon marking his progress in the popular story, was on a stand by the piano.*

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<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of articles presented in this section are taken from this rich resource, currently located at: <http://www.angelfire.com/az/Taylorology/>

*The dining-room was orderly, save where the police had been forced to move the blood-stained rugs through from the living room.*

*Strange were the stories told about Taylor today--while his lifeless body was being moved to the Ivy Overholtzer undertaking parlor.*

*He was tall, handsome, charming to meet--that is, if one was fortunate enough to meet him.*

*But he was mysterious of habits.*

*He was quiet, unobtrusive and never entertained women in his bachelor apartments alone.*

*Four years he had lived in the severe, cold-looking colonial apartment court. Four years he had been there, but in that time he was unknown to others who lived there.*

*He seldom entertained. And when he did--his visitors left at a reasonable hour. They were always quiet, just like himself.*

*And when he had work to do, Taylor would not answer the doorbell, the telephone, but would stay locked in his apartment, until everything was finished.*

*It was just his manner.*

*Likewise--he did not believe in "wild parties" at his home.*

*In the four years he had lived at the place he had entertained upon three memorable occasions, and there were crowds, chaperons, and the parties broke up early.*

*And they tell how very inconspicuously he dressed. Always he was well groomed--that is what those who were fortunate enough to get a glimpse of the man say--but never what was called "a fashion plate."*

*He hadn't been home of evenings lately much--because the light in his living room had been out. That was the way neighbors knew that the popular director was about.*

*Taylor was silent about his business affairs. He discussed them with nobody. He kept his own counsel, just as he preferred to live alone.*

*His heart affairs were also seldom discussed. But that Miss Minter was very popular with the dead man was discerned by the fact that her telephone number led the list in the directory in his telephone booth.*

*Likewise, other film favorites had their place in his calling list, but his name has not been linked with any of them, although he was known as an eligible bachelor.*

If then Taylor was indeed and essentially a "good" man, then who would have wanted and sought to have him slain? As *one* way of trying to answer this, let's start with the assumption that the pre-murder burglaries and the murder itself are connected. This, of course, has yet to be established. Indeed, among historians, scholars, and most of the detectives, no one has even yet seriously tried to maintain it. For the sake of argument, however, let's look at the case from this angle and see where it might take us. Since the very first investigations, few or none have asserted that the burglaries and murderer are connected other than to suggest Sands as a suspect. Yet more often than not the Sands as killer theory has been brushed aside as unlikely. Consequently, it is concluded that the burglaries and murder are somehow just a coincidence.

### **The Burglaries**

Upon returning from trip to Europe, in July 1921, Taylor found his valet and houseman Edward F. Sands had stolen, money, clothes, and wrecked his expensive sports car.<sup>2</sup> The valet disappeared and Taylor had a warrant put out for his arrest. Then on December 4, Taylor's home was broken into. Jewelry was stolen; apparently, by Sands; who then sold the goods in Stockton, and then mailed the pawn tickets back to Taylor, accompanied by a mocking note. By December 17, the incidents had taken on such notoriety that they were made a light-hearted joke of in a newspaper column.<sup>3</sup>

\* from *New York Telegraph*, January 8, 1922

*One of the burglars who robbed William D. Taylor of jewelry worth \$1,700 returned two weeks later and smoked a cigarette on the porch of the motion picture director's home.*

*How did Taylor know about the return visit? The nocturnal visitor left the butt of his cigarette on the step. It was gold-tipped, of the exclusive brand used by the director, the entire stock was stolen with the jewelry.*

*Between 8 p.m. and midnight of December 4, burglars battered down the back door of 404-B South Alvarado street. The police found evidence of a leisurely luncheon in the kitchen -- and footprints on the bed upstairs! The visitors had thoroughly ransacked the house for jewels and cigarettes, but overlooked other valuables.*

After the murder occurred in February, other reports of intruders, and Taylor's efforts to fight them off appeared.

\* from *Los Angeles Record*, February 2, 1922

1. *Taylor had a premonition that death was near, and related his fear to Mrs. J. M. Berger, income tax expert. "If anything happens," he told her yesterday afternoon, "look out for my affairs."*

2. *Mysterious phone calls and anonymous letters were received by Taylor. He told Mrs. Berger that for three weeks someone had been attempting to find out if Taylor was in his apartment. When Taylor answered, the person would hang up immediately.*

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<sup>2</sup> William Desmond Taylor A Dossier, p. 216-217

<sup>3</sup> Los Angeles Herald, Dec. 17, 1921.

3. Taylor was engaged in a telephone call that evidently worried him, when Mabel Normand called at his apartments at 7:15 p.m. yesterday.<sup>4</sup>

4. Taylor is reported to have told Charles Maigne, a friend, that he feared unknown persons, who invaded his apartments while he was absent, walked on his bed with dusty shoes, and left gold-tipped cigarette stubs.

5. Charles Maigne says Taylor believed an enemy would do him harm.<sup>5</sup>

\* from *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 3, 1922

*The officers were diligently following the trail of the mysterious man after they learned that several times the strange nocturnal visitor had been driven away by Taylor at the point of a gun.*

*But two weeks ago, the investigators said Taylor found this man trying to gain entrance to the bungalow by means of a bedroom window. The window was half open and Taylor is said to have driven him away.*

*Many times the murdered director is said to have heard unusual noises about the house and upon investigation found the unwelcome visitor prowling about the building or premises, but each time Taylor flourished a gun and drove him away.*

*And then again, the police say in trying to weave a chain of incriminating evidence about the hunted man, Taylor received telephone calls which brought forth no response when he answered. It is believed the calls came from this person who was ascertaining if any one was at home at the bungalow.*

\* from *Los Angeles Record*, February 3, 1922

*A guest in the Dumas home next to Taylor said he saw two men last Monday night in the court yard. The men, the guest said, went to the door of Taylor's home, tried the door with a key, then walked away. One of these men, the police believe, is probably the murderer.*

*Taylor's colored valet, Harry [sic] Peavey, who found the body, said that on several occasions Taylor had been annoyed by mysterious persons walking around his house. He said that on one occasion he asked Taylor why he didn't carry his gun.*

*"Somebody is liable to walk up those stairs when you're in your bedroom," he said he told Taylor, "and hold you up."*

*"No, he won't," Peavey said Taylor replied. "I keep my gun on the bureau, and if I hear anyone walking up those stairs and he doesn't answer when I call him, he's a goner."*

*Peavey said Taylor did drive away these nocturnal visitors on several occasions at the point of a gun....*

### **Sands, the Burglars, and the Killer**

It is fairly obvious that it wasn't Sands (as such) who Taylor had in mind in thinking he needed to protect himself. Since Sands was clearly implicated in the earlier robberies, was the miscreant valet somehow connected with the group that later assaulted Taylor in his home?

"Dear Mr. Taylor, So sorry to inconvenience you, even temporarily. Also observe the lesson of forced sale of assets. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. (Signed) "Alias Jimmy V."

It seems very unlikely that a boyish "galoot," such as witness Faith MacLean described him, would take such a contemptuous tone with Taylor if he were not acting with the support of others.<sup>6</sup> The details of an association between Sands and a criminal group of some kind leave much to conjecture. Nonetheless, it stands as very plausible that some point either before or after the first robbery when Taylor was on vacation, Sands was contacted and enlisted by someone with a grudge against Taylor. This person or persons, already had a gang in place, and Sands, in effect, became a new member or accessory of some kind. Subsequently in the next burglaries which he carried out, Sands was participating with the group in some way. Again, the specifics of such a scenario are hard to guess. Yet if, as we posit, the other person or group wanted to kill Taylor, was this also Sands intent? Not at all, for the simple reason that Sands was deliberately *not* informed of the other's darker purposes. Indeed, there was perhaps good reason for this; for in point of fact, what happened was that Sands became a patsy for the real killer, which was possibly the killer's intention. Taylor's subsequent murder then came as much as a surprise to Sands as anyone. At the same time, Sands' complete and permanent disappearance, without police ever really finding him, is persuasive evidence that he was in some way connected with the crime, although not necessarily knowing about it (before the fact.)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mabel Normand, who said she was standing outside while it was taking place, was suspicious of this call as well. However, it is since generally accepted (though we can't know for sure, of course) that the call was from actor Antonio Moreno, and according to Moreno was of merely a routine business nature.

<sup>5</sup> see also *Los Angeles Express*, Feb. 2, 1922

<sup>6</sup> Taylor may have fired his chauffeur Earl Tiffany, in Aug. 1921, because he believed Tiffany was in league with Sands. See *Dossier*, p. 218.

<sup>7</sup> It's worth noting in this respect that Sands was publicly promised by the police that if, unless guilty of the murder itself, he came in for questioning, no charges would or could be filed against him for the earlier robberies since Taylor, the only one who could accuse him in court, was dead.

Following this line of reasoning, we could know who the killer was if we knew who was in this “gang,” and who their “boss” was (if they had any as such). For one thing, the burglaries and assaults were motivated by more than mere material gain (though this no doubt was incentive for some). The stomping on Taylor's bed in dirty shoes, their taking time to sit down and eat in his kitchen, their return visits, and mysterious phone calls, show a decidedly abusive and harassing character.

Clearly, they did not merely want to steal from him; they wanted to purposely and maliciously harm him. This desire to hurt him, in his home no less, strongly suggests our killer, and begins to give us some potential clue as to the his (their) motive. Needless to say, the possibilities as to motive are numerous, and this is no easy question to answer concretely. The group may have been one disgruntled person, heading the gang, who ultimately wanted Taylor killed (à la Wilkes Booth), or the group collectively. Some theorists have gone so far as to suggest an all out conspiracy among important studio figures.

The following seem to recommend themselves as among the most plausible reasons Taylor was hated by someone:

1. Professional or Romantic Jealousy (possibly the jealousy of someone whom Taylor did not know that well, or at all.)
2. Taylor had insulted someone (“he was intolerant of mediocrity” stated one contemporary.)
3. Romantic rejection, or else romantic obsession with him.
4. Peculiarly depraved people who, out of psychological derangement, wanted to push an idealist and man of principle to his limits: moral anarchists if you will.

\* from **Los Angeles Express**, February 2, 1922

*Motion picture circles in Los Angeles were shocked when the first news of the murder reached them in an extra edition of the Evening Express.*

*The blow was particularly felt at the Lasky studio; where Taylor was known to every actor, actress, property man and other employees.*

*Immediately on receipt of the news work at the studios and on location ceased and men and women, their pallor showing through the grease paint of their makeups, gathered in knots to discuss the tragedy and speculate on what prompted the crime.*

*Many theories were offered, among them revenge for fancied wrong, desire for gain and jealousy.*

\* from **Los Angeles Express**, February 8, 1922

*Three men have been under suspicion by these officers for the past two days. One of them may be arrested today. It was definitely stated by the sheriff's office that steps would be taken to charge one of them with complicity, at least, in the crime.*

*This assertion dovetails with intimation that Taylor was the victim of a sinister plot in which many persons well known to the public are more or less involved. It is whispered that before the investigation is concluded a startling list of names will be bandied about as co-conspirators in the slaying of the noted director.*

*Shortly after 9 o'clock deputies were dispatched to look for the one of the trio said to have full knowledge of the murder and to collect further evidence relative to the asserted conspiracy...*

*Sand's connection with the case has proved the bone of contention between various officials working on the mystery. The police department, practically to a man, are inclined to believe him guilty of the murder.*

*Representatives of the sheriff's office take a diametrically opposite view. There is nothing in the evidence thus far disclosed which would connect the former secretary with the crime, they say.*

\* from **Long Beach Daily Telegram**, February 8, 1922

*Police seeking the slayer of William Desmond Taylor, movie director, were working on the theory today that his assassin was hired to kill him. It is believed that Edward F. Sands, former valet of the director, may have been the hired assassin. In pursuance of this theory, detectives were checking up on members of the movie colony who were acquainted with Sands...*

*The new theory is that the person who desired to have Taylor slain remembered the old enmity between the director and his former valet and used this, as well as money, to secure his death.*

*Taylor is believed to have had enemies, as well as friends, in the motion picture colony. These enemies were men as well as women, and some of the enmities sprang from the numerous love affairs he is understood to have had.*

*One of these enemies employed Sands to do the killing, according to the police theory...*

\* from **Dallas Times Herald**, February 9, 1922

*“A motion picture director can break as well as make an actor, and I believe William Desmond Taylor was killed by some actor or actress whom he recently refused to place in a production,” Elzier La Maie, motion picture director and instructor in motion picture acting, said Wednesday.*

*Mr. La Maie has recently come to Dallas from the Pacific coast, where he directed motion pictures for a number of years.*

*“I knew Mr. Taylor very well,” said Mr. La Maie, “and regarded him very highly. He was a splendid director, and was well liked by everybody who knew him. He was regarded as a gentleman always.*

*“Many directors have incurred the enmity and hatred of actors whom they refused to cast in certain productions, or by actors who believed the directors were trying to break them or make them unpopular with the public. It is my belief that some one harboring such a grudge is responsible for Taylor's death.”*

Possibly Taylor's killer(s) may have been homosexual, as was perhaps Taylor himself, as some have claimed. One ground for possibly supposing this is that Sands, at different times expressed both strong adoration and contempt of Taylor.

\* from *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 6, 1922

[Winifred Kingston, a friend of Taylor's]: "On another occasion Sands did another peculiar thing. Mr. Taylor had two thermos bottles around the house, neither of any particular value.

"There were many other things Sands easily could have stolen of more value, but he took one of these bottles to present to some girl. Her mother did not understand the act at all and didn't want the girl to take it.

"Most unusual of Sands' actions, however, was a document he once drew up.

"One day, to show his affection and regard for Mr. Taylor, he wrote, in his own handwriting, a sort of servile contract, in which he said that he would be Mr. Taylor's servant for life and would always be his slave.

"Mr. Taylor told me about the document and laughed. I don't know what every happened to the paper, but Sands apparently took it seriously.

"All of this led me to believe that the man was mentally deranged and he is the only man I can think of who might have killed Mr. Taylor."

Taylor's hiring the effeminate Peavey and fawning Sands may suggest Taylor was homosexual,<sup>8</sup> but aside from this we have no definite evidence. From what we actually know about Taylor, the two may have been taken on out of fatherly benevolence as much -- indeed more so -- than any other reasons. This would be very much in keeping with Taylor's desire, expressed both in his work and privately (as some reported), to be an upholder of ideals and a mentor to youth. In all, I take the interpretation of Taylor himself being homosexual to be a claim without much beyond rumor and gossip to substantiate it.<sup>9</sup>

### The Night of the Murder

The conventionally accepted story of the night of Taylor's death is: Between 7:00-7:45 pm on Feb. 1, Mabel Normand was having a friendly visit with Taylor in his bungalow. Books were the primary topic, and nothing of particular significance took place (although Peavey later claimed the two had argued.) When it was over Taylor escorted Mabel to her car, during which time someone snuck into the bungalow. The killer concealed inside, Taylor returned to his home and was shot by him shortly afterward. The gunman then made a clean escape. While there were people who passed the scene, including Howard Fellows who actually knocked on Taylor's door, during the night no one other than the killer knew that Taylor had been killed. Next morning, Henry Peavey, Taylor's houseman, came to work and found Taylor's body, shortly after 7:30 am.

For our purposes here, let's see if a different scenario might not fit better what actually happened, followed by accounts and testimony to gird and reinforce such an interpretation.

Mabel visits Taylor between 7:00-7:45 pm, Feb 1. Taylor walks her to her car, and having said farewell, goes inside. The killer, however, is *not inside*. Taylor sits down to go through his canceled checks and account books, having casually left open his door as was often his habit, even in winter. Despite the previous assaults on his home, he may have thought it unmanly to need to be too cautious. As well the good mood he was reported to be in that evening may have caused him to let down his guard. Sometime then just before or about 9:00 pm, the killer, a member of our "gang," is stalking outside Taylor's house. In his moving about, and possibly pausing to prepare himself, he sees the door open, stealthily sneaks up, then rushes inside. Before Taylor can be aware of what has just happened, the gunman has Taylor stick his hands up, possibly getting him to turn around first. Something perhaps is said by one and or the other. The killer then, with the gun pointing right into Taylor's back, pulls the trigger -- either with a vengeance or else, perhaps as someone employed, in a casual and matter of fact manner.<sup>10</sup>

As the assassin goes to leave, he is spotted by neighbor Faith MacLean. However, his nonchalance prevents her from being suspicious.

At some point from around 9:30 pm or perhaps within a few hours after the deed, someone discovers that Taylor is dead. Who found him? This may have been Taylor's chauffeur, Howard Fellows (although it may be that Fellows was not even at the bungalow at all that night as he later claimed.) Returning with Taylor's car sometime around 9:30 pm or later, he knocks on Taylor's door. At the same time as he gets no response to his repeated knocks, he notices that the light is on in Taylor's bungalow. Curious he peers through a crack in the

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<sup>8</sup> See *N.Y. Herald*, Feb. 6, 1922, T62.

<sup>9</sup> Someone objected after reading this conclusion that the dubious sort of evidence I speak of is as much as one could possess regarding such a claim, short of an open avowal by Taylor or else his being criminally convicted of sodomy. My response -- even if we assume Taylor was homosexual, this does little or nothing to change the gist of my explanation and interpretation of the case.

<sup>10</sup> L.A. detective William Cahill believed Taylor's killer embraced him before hand, and in this posture shot him. Moreover and partly due to this conjectured embrace, Cahill thought the culprit to have been Charlotte Shelby acting out of amorous jealousy.

window blind, and to his shock sees Taylor lying in blood murdered. There is no mistaking it is murder, and he contacts his brother and Paramount studio employee, Harry Fellows.

\* from *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 10, 1922

*Los Angeles--...Dumas said that on the night of the murder he had noticed that Taylor's study window shade was up several inches so anyone could have looked into the room and have seen him lying dead on the floor.*

Another scenario would have the word spread first by the killers themselves, via, the gang. A note, with perhaps a joking tone to it, is sent by a dupe messenger.

In any case, word gets to Paramount manager Charles Eyton (possibly through Harry Fellows), who then disturbs Jesse Lasky's evening with the disastrous news. Police are not formally informed until Lasky can figure out what needs to be done to make sure studio interests are protected. What exactly followed after this point can only be left to speculation. It may be that Taylor's home was re-entered during the night by the studio people, which might account for why Taylor's body lay so neatly on the floor, as well as some of the other evidence later alleged to be found on the scene, such as the three blonde hairs found on his coat lapel.<sup>11</sup> This would also possibly explain why Taylor's window curtain was partially up.

\* from *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 1922

*Mr. Dumas, director in the Cal-Mex Oil Company, was among those who responded to the alarm after the murder. He also saw the blind in the front room of the Taylor apartment raised about four inches when he came home on the night of the slaying about 11 o'clock. The light was on at that time, but the fact that the curtain was raised was unusual, he said.*

Regardless of whether or not the crime site was actually and subsequently entered during the night, the studio people agree to wait till morning to go through the bungalow, rather than risk creating too much of a disturbance, and unnecessarily implicate themselves. Using his enormous clout as head of Paramount, Lasky<sup>12</sup> goes directly to police heads, and after telling them what happened, says he needs their help to protect studio. It is not difficult for him to convince them he is not the killer, for the simple case that he isn't, and can make his case as such. His purpose is to keep the scandal contained as best it may be, and the police fully understand.

They decide then that Peavey should "discover" the body in the morning; so as to avoid having to later explain how the body was actually found (and perhaps even handled), or why there was a delay in officially bringing the police onto scene. Peavey is roused in his bed. After being informed what has happened, they tell him that he is going to be the one who finds the body, and the police, then studio people, will then await their cue to come on the scene. Some among the studio people may have had then correct suspicions as to the killer's identity or perhaps even knew who the killer was. Yet far from viewing themselves as conspirators, the studio employees and police, in looking out for the studio's interests, saw themselves as the city's first line of defense in acting as they did.

## The Charade

Next morning, Peavey does his ordinary run for Taylor's milk of magnesia (to make things look routine as possible), and "finds" the body even though he knows well in advance what he will find. Even so, it is no less distressing. In his earliest accounts of seeing Taylor's body on the morning of February 2, Peavey states that he found his dead employer lying in a pool of blood. Interestingly enough, this devastating detail given in his first interviews is omitted entirely in all his later versions of what took place. Although prepared in advance, he is emotionally still very affected.

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<sup>11</sup> The latter would seem to imply Mary Miles Minter would be such a person; however, it seems unlikely she would have been involved in this "secret" search. The explanations for the blonde hairs and silk nightgown, as explained by Bruce Long, can be explained on the basis of:

The 1926 press reports (after Keyes' briefcase was stolen) only said that blonde hairs were found by King on Taylor's body. King's 1930 article discusses finding the hairs on p. 288 of my book, but it's unclear which date he is referring to. However, since King was not assigned to the case until Feb. 3, then the hairs were not found before that date. Possibilities:

a. On Feb. 3, Minter visited Taylor's body at the undertaker's, which is where the hairs were later found on Taylor's clothing. Could Minter have touched and hugged Taylor's clothing, when she was there? If so, that is a possible explanation for the hairs being there.

b. In King's article, he admits fabricating a previous public statement (regarding a psychic's phone call) in order to hopefully draw an incriminating statement from Shelby/Minter. Although blonde hairs were certainly found on Taylor's body, perhaps the identification of the hairs as belonging to Minter was similarly fabricated. Indeed, if the hairs truly had been identified as belonging to Minter, then it is very strange that Sanderson doesn't mention it in his 1941 letter, which leads me to feel that the hairs may not truly have been identified as Minter's.

In 1922, the police made no statement regarding the nightgown. Reporter Frank Bartholomew was the one who said he saw it, with initials, and he broke the story. Cline later stated that the nightgown had no initials. Peavey said the nightgown had been there long before the day of the murder. I think the nightgown probably had no initials. Taylor certainly had several of Minter's handkerchiefs, and it's logical that those handkerchiefs would have been in the same part of dresser as the nightgown. Perhaps Bartholomew just had a quick glance inside that drawer, saw the initialed handkerchiefs on top of the nightgown, and mentally transposed the initials onto the nightgown.

<sup>12</sup> It is not necessary that the person have been Lasky who contacted the police. Someone from (most likely) Paramount studio, who had much clout in the city, would perhaps have temporarily served in this role just as well.

\* from *Los Angeles Record*, February 2, 1922

"Good night, Henry, good night," he said to me when I left him yesterday," said Henry Peavey, Taylor's colored valet, between sobs as he told of the tragedy that ended the life of his beloved employer last night.

"Good night, Mr. Taylor," I said to him, and that's the last I saw of him until I opened the door this morning and found his dead body, his feet stretching toward me on the floor."

The negro broke into soft sobs and then declared passionately: "I wish I could get the man that did it. I'd go to jail for the rest of my life if I could get him."

As Peavey talked, he was taking some white cloths clotted with blood from a wire paper basket and placing them in the court incinerator.

"His blood," the negro said, pathetically. "We just used the cloths to clean up the room."

"Mr. Taylor was the most wonderful man I ever worked for and I don't see how anybody would want to kill him. I have been with him six months."

Peavey said that he came to Taylor's apartment early today, intending to go through the usual round of his duties.

"I was going to fix his bath water for him," said the valet, "and then give him his dose of medicine. After that I was going to fix his breakfast—a couple of boiled eggs, some toast and a glass of orange juice.

"When I opened the door I saw him lying there stretched out on the floor, his feet toward me and the floor all bloody.

"I turned and screamed and the landlord came rushing in."

Peavey said he lived at 127 1/2 Third Street.

"I have not been staying with Taylor during the night, but have been sleeping in my room."

Peavey's theory was that somebody slipped into the open door of Taylor's apartment when Taylor took Mabel Normand to her car late last night, and shot him from ambush inside the room.

\* from *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 3, 1922

"I've worked for a lot of men," he went on, "but Mr. Taylor was the most wonderful of all of them. I came here this morning intending to fix his bath and get his breakfast, which I always does. And before the bath I'd bring him a dose of medicine. It was always just the same -- for breakfast two soft-boiled eggs, toast and a glass of orange juice.

"And having it in my mind to make everything just as nice as I could, knowing he would be pleased and say a kind word, I opened the door.

"And then I found him stretched out on the floor, which was all bloody and his feet toward the door.

"And then I backed to the door, pretty near overcome with horror, and yelled for the landlord. The way I figure it is that somebody slipped in last night when Mr. Taylor took Miss Normand to the car and shot him from hiding. But how could any one kill such a man as he was?"

Three days later, at the Coroners Inquest, Peavey came across to reporters this way:

\* from *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 5, 1922

[Coroner Nance:] "What did you see?"

"I saw his feet, and I said 'Mr. Taylor'--just like that. Then I saw his face, and I turned and run out and yelled. And then I yelled some more—"

And then Henry broke into high pitched laughter as he recalled his fright and terror. Laughed as he thought of himself going in and speaking to a dead man. It was a huge joke--no doubt about it. And the joke was on him.

Of course, He laughed and those in the room laughed with him...

\* from *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, February 5, 1922

"Who was the first person that you told Mr. Taylor was dead?"

It was then that the negro began laughing in a hysterical manner. He doubled forward in the chair. His shrieks of laughter caused a real sensation. A number of women spectators appeared frightened by the actions of the witness who was finally quieted. He was then asked...

The story subsequently related of a mysterious doctor (who strangely never later turned up) coming on the scene, and pronouncing Taylor as having died from a hemorrhage is a complete phony, inasmuch as the doctor was a phony. The purpose of this charade was to allow studio people to rummage the place, before the coroner arrived, without suggesting they were tampering with the crime scene. Again, the police have no reason to think the studio has any purpose other than to look after its important interest, by recovering anything which might, if found as evidence, be thought of as injuring Paramount studio's reputation. There is no suggestion that killer is being covered up for; they all are sincere in expressing their wish to see him apprehended. Only what was done was done, and now what mattered most was that the bad publicity be smothered and contained as best it might be.

### The Time Element Problem

It has generally been assumed that Taylor's murder took place within the last quarter hour prior to 8 o'clock, but could this be wrong? The final conclusion that the murder took place within this time frame rests entirely on chauffeur Howard Fellows' testimony. On the other hand almost every known newspaper account of the first day after the shooting gives 9 o'clock or closely thereabouts as the time of the shooting.

The following are some articles that support the 9 o'clock version as being the correct one. True, it is not uncommon to find errors in the newspaper first editions; nevertheless, where they are consistent does support a case for their accuracy.

\* from *New York Tribune*, February 10, 1922

*Los Angeles, Feb. 9.--Evidence supporting the theory that William D. Taylor, murdered film director, was the victim of a hired assassin came to light today with the opening of a wide-spread investigation of the mystery by District Attorney Thomas Lee Woolwine.*

*The "fighting prosecutor," as he is called, personally questioned witness after witness, to lay a foundation for the grilling of at least two film stars, who will be called before him tomorrow...*

*Patrolman Albert Long, whose statement does not seem to have played a part in the investigation carried on by the detective bureau, was the witness who added new facts concerning the activities about the Taylor bungalow on the night of the shooting.*

*The policeman said that shortly after 8 o'clock in the evening he had seen a man loitering in the street which skirts the side of the court in which the director's bungalow is located. He said the man wore a cap, an overcoat and a "mussy suit," which he was unable to describe in greater detail.*

*The description fits that of the man who, according to Mrs. Douglas MacLean, a neighbor of Taylor, was seen loitering about the front of the house two or more minutes after the firing of the shot that took the life of the director.*

*If the man seen by the policeman is the murderer it would indicate that the assassin was a cool-headed, professional gunman, who for some as yet unexplained reason remained within a stone's throw of the scene of the killing, trusting to luck to escape should the crime be prematurely exposed...*

If murder happened at 9:00 this would have probably been the killer *before* the event, not after, which only makes more sense.

The very credible testimony of George Arto, brother in law of King Vidor, also helps to bolster the case against the 8:00 pm shooting. The "third man" mentioned in these pieces with Peavey and Davis, may have been a studio person who simply wished to be kept out for publicity reasons, and had connections or clout enough himself to effect this.

\* from *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 22, 1922

*An amplified statement secured yesterday by The Examiner from George F. Arto, motion picture writer, gives new facts which tend to change the whole theory of the crime as to its time element.*

*Arto, it will be recalled, passed front of the Taylor house on the night of the murder and, as he states, saw Peavey standing on the sidewalk talking to a man of swarthy complexion -- a rough looking character.*

*This was at approximately 7 o'clock.*

*His memory refreshed by circumstances to which his attention had been called since giving his first statement, he remembered yesterday that he returned to the bungalow court at 7:45 o'clock.*

*He is positive of this, he said, as he phoned a young woman who lives near the Taylor bungalow, on whom he was calling. He told her in this conversation that he would be over in five minutes and, looking at his watch, he found the time to be 7:40.*

*He immediately started to walk from his home at 220 South Bonnie Brae street. He reached a point in front of Taylor's house within five minutes.*

*"At that time," he said, "I saw no one around. Miss Normand's car had gone, and Peavey was not in sight."*

*He went to the house of the young woman, and sat in the front room next to the window until about ten minutes after eight.*

*"During that time," he declared, "I heard no shot and am positive that I would have heard a shot been fired."*

*Arto is familiar with firearms, having tested guns for the Savage Arms Company and would be able, he asserts, to distinguish a pistol shot from the backfire of automobiles.*

*As close to the scene of the crime as was either Mrs. MacLean or her maid, Christian Jewett, and in a better position to hear and observe, Arto nevertheless was not attracted by any unusual noises.*

*Hence, it is now believed possible that the murder may have been committed either before or after the time fixed by Mrs. MacLean. And District Attorney Woolwine yesterday admitted the likelihood that the man seen by Mrs. MacLean leaving Taylor's front door was Howard Fellows, the film director's chauffeur.*

Another curious and interesting story is this:

\* from *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 4, 1922

*An excellent example of habitual observation was brought to light yesterday when Mrs. Ida Garrow, a modiste living at the Rose of Sharon Apartments, told Examiner investigators that on Wednesday night as she was walking down Ocean View avenue, at the intersection of Alvarado street, she noticed a man acting in a very peculiar manner.*

*"It was about eight thirty, or possibly twenty minutes of nine," said Mrs. Garrow yesterday. "Wednesday evening I was hurrying to my club which meets at the corner of Grand View and Ocean View avenue. I was late for a class that was studying Hebrew which I did not want to miss, but as I have trained my*

observational faculties in the study of astrology. It is without voluntary effort that I perceive whatever comes within the range of vision.

*"As I came to Alvarado street, I saw a tall, slender, smooth shaven policeman, whose face I would instinctively recognize if I were to see him again, walking toward Ocean View avenue. Walking with him was another man, to whom I did not pay particular attention, because my curiosity was aroused by the peculiar actions of a man who was coming toward me a few feet in front of the policeman. Although the policeman was not paying the slightest attention to this man, the man was glancing back apprehensively over his shoulder, and at times looking in away from the street which would be directly in toward the court where the body of Mr. Taylor was found.*

*"As the policeman got closer to this man, the man crossed the street, and I noticed as he crossed that he was short and stout and wore a long overcoat, but there was the shadow of a building falling at such an angle that I could not determine whether he wore a cap or a hat."*

*Who was the policeman walking down Alvarado street at 8:30 or 8:45, and what did he see? This slight clue given by a careful observer may lead to very important developments in the mysterious murder whose points are now baffling the keenest detectives of the city.*

With respect to other witnesses, the following come from some of the main newspaper accounts of that first day.

\* from **Long Beach Daily Telegram**, February 2, 1922

*Shot down while writing at a desk by a mysterious assassin, William Desmond Taylor, well known motion picture producer and director, was found dead today in his bungalow in the Westlake District. Death was caused by a bullet wound in the back, just below the left shoulder, according to police.*

*Taylor, who was 50 years old and wealthy, apparently was killed between 9 and 10 o'clock last night. The body was found today by a colored servant when he reported for duty at the house.*

*Police detectives who first reached the scene reported that death was from natural causes and it was not until nearly an hour later when an undertaker was removing the body that the bullet wound was found.*

*Additional officers immediately were dispatched to the house and a comprehensive investigation was begun. The bullet wound caused an internal hemorrhage and Taylor accidentally died a few minutes after being attacked.*

*Detectives questioned neighbors, who stated they heard what apparently was the report of the revolver shortly after 9 p.m. but at that time believed it was caused by an automobile.*

*The police immediately began search for Edward F. Sands, former secretary of Taylor. Robbery was not the motive for the murder it was announced, as officers found \$73 in the pocket of the slain man, as well as a large amount of jewelry in the house.*

*Taylor's revolver was found in a drawer of the dresser in his bedroom on the second floor of the pretentious house. It had not been discharged and none of his personal effects had been disturbed.*

*The officers reported they are confident that revenge was the motive of the mysterious slayer.*

*The police records state that when Taylor went to England a year ago on a business and pleasure trip he left Sands, then his secretary, in charge of his personal affairs and when he returned he reported to Detective Sergeants Herman Cline and E. R. Cato that Sands had robbed him of money, jewelry, clothing and a valuable automobile.*

*A felony warrant was issued for Sands and the police say he never was found.*

*A second robbery at the Taylor residence was attributed to Sands by the police.*

*Among the witnesses questioned by the police during the morning were Mabel Normand, Edna Purviance and Douglas MacLean, prominent film stars.*

*Miss Normand admitted having visited Taylor's bungalow in the early evening yesterday to discuss a new production and that he had escorted her to her automobile at the curb shortly before 9 p.m. Taylor was to telephone to her later in the evening. Miss Normand said he did not do so.*

*Miss Purviance, who lives in a house adjoining Taylor's bungalow, returned home about midnight and saw a light burning in Taylor's study.*

*MacLean and his wife, who live in the same district, stated they heard the shot fired after 9 o'clock. They thought at the time it might be an automobile exhaust. They described a strange man whom they saw in the street.*

*Miss Normand told detectives that while she was talking with Taylor early last evening concerning a new picture production the robberies of the Taylor home were mentioned.*

*"He told me he feared Sands and that he had a premonition of something wrong," Miss Normand was quoted as telling officers.*

\* from **Los Angeles Evening Express**, February 2, 1922

*The slayer evidently committed the crime about near 9 o'clock last night. It was at that time that Douglas MacLean, motion picture actor, and his wife, who lived next door, say they heard the sound of the pistol shot.*

*Police also believe that the slaying occurred at that time because of the opinion expressed by the deputy coroner that the man had been dead for more than ten hours when the body was found.*

*The last person who saw Taylor alive, with the exception of the assassin, was Miss Mabel Normand, film star. She visited him at his home last night. She arrived at the home shortly before 7 o'clock, she said. Her statement to Detectives Winn and Murphy follows:*

...Douglas MacLean and his wife were having their supper in their home that also adjoins Taylor's house, but to the east, when they heard the sound of a shot. They place the time at about 9:30 or 9 o'clock in the statement they made to Detective Sergeants Wallis and Ziegler....

Mrs. MacLean, however, told the officers that she noticed a man walking rapidly down the walk towards Taylor's home last evening shortly after Miss Normand left. She gave the following description of the man to officers: Height about 5 feet 8 or 9 inches, weight about 165 pounds. He had a muffler about his neck and was at the time wearing a plaid cap pulled over his eyes. She did not notice the clothing he was wearing and was unable to furnish the police with a better description because she says, she was unable to see distinctly at that hour of the night.

"I had, of course, no reason to be suspicious of that man at that time," said Mrs. MacLean, when discussing the case with the two detective sergeants. "But now I am convinced that he was the slayer. It was after I had seen him that my husband and I sat down to dinner. That was about 8:30 or 9 o'clock, I guess.

"We had just started our dinner when we heard a pistol shot. We did not investigate because we heard nothing further after that to arouse our suspicions and we thought that possibly the sound we heard then was that of an automobile backfiring in the street. Now, of course, we know that it was the shot that ended the life of Mr. Taylor."

See also *Los Angeles Record*, Feb. 2, 1922, *Boston Herald* Feb 3, 1922, and *Long Beach Daily Telegram*, February 2, 1922.

Despite these numerous initial reports and interviews, at the Coroner's Inquest *three days later*, the accounts of the key witnesses from the bungalow have the time of the shot occurring as 8:00 pm. What caused this change? The following item very likely suggests the woman being spoken of is Faith MacLean, the husband, Donald MacLean. Both worked for Paramount.

\* from *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 9, 1922

*One woman prominently identified with the investigation is said to be in possession of information which she has thus far failed to turn in. She has adopted an attitude of uncertainty in the whole matter, it is asserted. Detectives from the central police station were assigned orders to visit the woman and insist upon the facts in the case. Police informants declare she has been instructed by her husband to "develop" a sudden loss of memory.*

Was there a special reason why, aside from those in the MacLean home, others living in the bungalow court were so reticent about or oblivious to the shot?

\* from *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 4, 1922

*Other bungalow dwellers say they heard nothing Mrs. Myrtle B. Pratt, who lives at the entrance to the court, says she saw no suspicious character either entering or leaving the place and that she had heard no unusual sound of any description.*

*Mrs. J. K. Lawrence, who also lives at the Alvarado street entrance, said:*

*"There are so many automobiles passing here all of the time and their back-fire explosions are so similar to a pistol shot that we have gotten so we pay no attention to them whatever. I have no recollection of hearing anything that sounded like a shot at any particular time during the evening in which the shooting occurred, but I might have heard a dozen such sounds without feeling the slightest alarm. I think every occupant of the court should try to recollect anything he or she saw which might in any way throw light on the event."*

*Mrs. Charles Cooley, living two doors from the Taylor residence, said that she and her husband were sitting in their living room reading almost the entire evening and did not hear a sound. They had their blinds drawn and had no occasion to look out, so saw no one.*

*Mrs. Arthur W. Watcher, stated that she and her husband were out for the evening and returned late, but that they did not notice lights burning anywhere. Both she and Mrs. Cooley voiced the idea that people were entirely too unobservant of things going on around them, and Mrs. Cooley said:*

*"When I think that such a kind, fine man as Mr. Taylor is said to have been, was right here helpless, at the mercy of a fiendish murderer when some of us might have gone to his aid and saved him, and we only known what was going on. It seems that we all live too much to ourselves and that there ought to be some better mode of communication between us all."*

\* from *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 12, 1922

*...Mr. and Mrs. W. B. Lawrence of 400-A South Alvarado also told an interesting story.*

*The family was downstairs on the evening of the murder until about 8:30 o'clock, when Mrs. Lawrence went to the bedroom upstairs.*

*"My husband said he heard a short conversation -- portions of it -- a woman's laugh, a man say good-by, and then a car driving away."<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Lawrence said. Their apartment is the nearest in the court to Alvarado street.*

*"That is all we know."*

### **The Credibility of Howard Fellows**

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<sup>13</sup> It's interesting that Mabel and Taylor are identified by inference and not specific recognition. Might it possibly have been two other persons that Lawrence heard?

It has been taken for granted by most scholars that the late arriving testimony of crucial witness Howard Fellows, brother of Lasky employee Harry Fellows, is not to be doubted. Fellows' testimony is critical because it supposedly places almost exactly when the murder was to have transpired. Is it possible, notwithstanding, that Fellows, as part of a cover-up, was lying? His brother Harry, incidentally, was among those who, along with Charles Eyton, searched Taylor's bungalow the morning of February 2.<sup>14</sup>

\* from *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 8, 1922

*Declaring that he called William D. Taylor at 7:55 o'clock Wednesday night and receiving no answer, went to the apartment of the film director. arriving there at 8:15 o'clock, rang the doorbell and still met with no response, Howard Fellows, chauffeur for the murdered director, last night definitely fixed the time within which the crime must have been committed and added facts regarded as of first magnitude importance in their bearing upon the crime.*

*Strangely enough, this young man, who had been Taylor's driver for nearly six months, had not been questioned at length until yesterday, when an Examiner representative called on him at his home, 1622 Shatto place.*

*He is brother of Harry Fellows, who was Taylor's assistant director.*

*Yesterday Detective Sergeant Tom Zeigler took Howard to the Taylor home, 404-B South Alvarado street. He was partially identified by a resident of the neighborhood as the person he had seen seated in a car on the night of the murder near the scene of the crime and about the time it was committed.*

*Fellows denied this and convinced Zeigler that the man was mistaken.*

*One of Fellows' most interesting statements, other than that relating to his movements and observations on the night of the assassination, had to do with an alleged quarrel between Taylor and Mabel Normand.*

*"I was driving Mr. Taylor and Miss Normand from the Ambassador Hotel, where they had attended a New Year's Eve party, to her home," said Fellows.*

*"On the way they had a quarrel. I don't know what it was about, but both were very much excited.*

*"Mr. Taylor took Miss Normand home and then returned to his apartment. Upon arriving there he broke down and wept.*

*"On the following morning he did up some jewelry in a package and took it to Miss Normand at her home."*

*Henry Peavey, Taylor's colored valet, confirms this.*

*"Mr. Taylor and Miss Normand were very affectionate," continued Fellows. Questioned independently, Peavey said Taylor often caressed her.*

*As to these matters Fellows spoke casually, but when he entered upon the events of the night of February 1, his narrative became astounding both as to its content, and because he never told it before.*

*"I left the house (Mr. Taylor's) about 4:30 Wednesday afternoon," Fellows began.*

*"Mr. Taylor told me he might be going out in the evening and instructed me to be sure to telephone by 7:30. I went to the home of a young lady friend and was there until 7:55. I recall the time accurately because I had it on my mind to call Mr. Taylor and ask him if he would need the car.*

*"I called him two or three times before that hour, but received no reply. I left the house of my girl friend at five minutes to eight and drove directly to Mr. Taylor's.*

*"I reached there about quarter past eight.*

*"There was a light in the living room. I was surprised that Mr. Taylor should be home and not have answered the telephone.*

*"I rang the doorbell. Silence. I rang again. Still, no response. I must have rung three or four times. Then I concluded: 'Well, he has some one there and doesn't want to answer.*

*"So I put up the car, I was around back of the house, and it is peculiar that persons in the neighborhood should have heard me walking and not have heard me put up the car. I made a good deal of noise doing this, as the garage is difficult to get into, and I guess I must have backed the car up four or five times.*

*"I am satisfied that I am the man Mrs. Douglas MacLean saw standing on the porch and leaving the house, I wore a cap and a raincoat.*

*"I noticed no cars in the immediate vicinity and saw no one who aroused my suspicions.*

*"Naturally, I am convinced that both when I phoned and when I rang the doorbell, Mr. Taylor was lying there on the floor murdered."*

*Taking the testimony of Fellows and Miss Normand together, it is now possible to fix the time of the murder within fifteen minutes.*

*Miss Normand said she left Taylor between 7:30 and 7:45 o'clock.*

*Fellows called at 7:55.*

*The murder was committed between Miss Normand's leave taking and Fellows' phoning.*

*Hence, for the first time, the police have a picture of the murder as it relates to the time when and in which it was committed.*

*Before Fellows' statement became available there was no conclusive evidence as to the time the bullet of the assassin struck the film director down. testimony as to the shot being heard was so vague as to be unconvincing. It could not be said with finality that the murder did not occur at midnight or at any hour of the night.*

*The acts of the drama leading to the murder must have been brief. It would appear, indeed, that there were no preliminaries, that the intruder, concealed in the room, stepped out and fired the shot.*

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<sup>14</sup> See the 1941 police report of Detective Lieutenant Sanderson; found in *William Desmond Taylor: a dossier*.

*It is therefore deduced that it was a premeditated crime and not one precipitated by a quarrel or any sort of scene more than of momentary duration.*

*One group of police investigators and most of the deputy sheriffs working on the case are now convinced that the visit of Mabel Normand was the immediate antecedent occasion for the crime.*

*This theory naturally takes for granted that Miss Normand had not the slightest intimation that her dear friend was to be shot to death, but officers cannot help but believe that the murderer found the way for his crime paved in some way by the visit of Miss Normand.*

\* from *San Francisco Examiner*, February 10, 1922

◆ Walter Vogdes

*In contrast was Howard Fellows, Taylor's chauffeur, who followed Peavey. Fellows, a lad with a weak, somewhat furtive face, sat on a bench in Woolwine's outer office and with twitching fingers lit one cigarette after another, each one on the preceding one.*

*When his turn came to enter the inner office he literally ran inside, the way a timorous man runs into an ice cold plunge. When he came out his expression was frightened as he pulled his cap over his eyes and streaked it down the hallway...*

*Why did Fellows insist it was he whom Faith MacLean saw? How could he be so sure? Is it possible no one heard Fellow's starting his car because he wasn't there in the first place? Last, it should be noted, Fellows disappeared from public view just after being questioned for hardly more than a day.*

\* from *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 6, 1922

[Mabel:] *"There is a doubt yet in my mind but that the murderer was not in the house secreted during the time of my short visit with Mr. Taylor," she said. "I can't understand how he could have been brazen enough to have entered during the brief interim when Mr. Taylor came with me to the curbing."*

And added to this, how the much more astonishing that Howard Fellows should be knocking at Taylor door in only 15 minutes later, with the killer having committed the deed nicely in between.

### **Judgment from on High**

If there was a deliberate effort on the part of some major studio heads, and cooperated in by some of the police, including D.A. Woolwine, to transfer the reported time of the shooting from 9:00 pm to 8:00 pm, what could have been it's purpose? This, of course, can only be guessed at present. It might be argued the time change was done to mislead the real killer, as to what they knew. However, there is another possibility; namely, smear Mabel Normand by tying her more closely in with the crime, yet without formally implicating her of any guilt.

Why would they want to make things more difficult for Mabel?

1. Some important people were very angry with Mabel. Emotionally, they blamed her for what happened. And perhaps, though through no fault of her own, they were right, inasmuch as someone may have targeted Taylor out of jealousy over Mabel.
2. As of the Arbuckle scandal, Hollywood was already in the process of cleaning house. In the occurrence of the Taylor case, here was a perfect opportunity to rid themselves of suspected drug user Normand.
3. Mabel was known for a devastating wit that might have got her into trouble with someone. This was then, their bitter "joke" her.

To make this distortion of the facts all the more easily to accomplish -- even if this interfering with justice were somehow brought to light, the damage would still have been done, and there would be little sympathy for Mabel, and probably more for the seemingly would-be do-gooders who, it could be said, were only looking out for the Hollywood community's standing and reputation.

"...Mabel was the Patsy who got the blame for what other people did. She suffered humiliation and disgrace in silence when she could have set herself right -- by 'telling on' some one else..."<sup>15</sup>

### **The Investigation**

\* from *Los Angeles Evening Express*, January 3, 1922

*"The job is not worth it."*

*Such was the statement made by Charles A. Jones, chief of police, today after he announced he will appear later in the day before the mayor and pension board and ask to retire.*

*This announcement follows the circulation of many rumors for last three months that the chief intended to retire. Political wrangling both inside the police department and at the City hall followed his appointment by Mayor Cryer after the latter's election. Rumors about the central station are that either Capt. R. Lee Heath or Police Commissioner De Coe will be named to succeed Jones.*

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<sup>15</sup> James Quirk, *Photoplay*, May 1930. The "someone else" to whom Quirk is referring is probably Mary Miles Minter.

Chief Jones, following the announcement of his proposed retirement issued a burning statement in which he said:

*"No one man can run the Los Angeles police department. There are too many meddling so-called reformers and others who interfere with the work of the officers.*

*"They insist that the police department devote its entire efforts to running petty gamblers out of business instead of devoting itself to the more important work of protecting the lives and property of our citizens and the visitors in our midst.*

*"Not only that, but within the department itself, among the men and officers, there is too much bickering and conniving to 'get' each other's jobs."*

\* from **Los Angeles Herald**, February 6, 1922

*There was some friction in the police probe of the slaying today and it was reported that certain detectives had asked to be given other assignments rather than continue investigating the murder with asserted misunderstanding existing.*

\* from **Chicago Herald-Examiner**, February 9, 1922

*Los Angeles--...Members of the sheriff's office made an outright declaration that they were being hindered in the Taylor investigation by an "iron-clad conspiracy between police and members of the film colony," with regard to giving information concerning Taylor...*

\* from **San Francisco Bulletin**, February 9, 1922

*Los Angeles--Police have been bribed, witnesses silenced, evidence suppressed, in a gigantic plot engineered from behind the scenes in filmland to defeat the ends of justice in the Taylor mystery--these sensational charges were under investigation today by District Attorney Thomas Lee Woolwine, hurriedly summoned from his vacation...*

\* from **Los Angeles Record**, February 9, 1922

**Officials Muff Taylor Murder Probe Hopelessly for Week; Will Woolwine End Police Chaos?**

*So many things have gone undone in the investigation of William D. Taylor's mysterious murder in the brilliantly lighted living room of his Alvarado street apartments eight days ago, that the heralded centralization of sleuthing by the district attorney's office comes as a distinct relief after a long list of official blunders.*

**BLUNDER NO. 1**

*First in the list of blunders was the summoning by detectives of a physician whose lack of thoroughness is evidenced by the fact that he pronounced the death from hemorrhage without examining the body, thus postponing for two hours knowledge that murder had been committed.*

**BLUNDER NO. 2**

*Second was the failure of the detectives to obtain the physician's name.*

**BLUNDER NO. 3**

*Third was the wanton destruction of vital evidence--fingerprints of the murderer--by either detectives or curious spectators. The chair that had evidently been carefully lifted by the murderer and placed over one leg of the dead man must have retained impressions of the criminal's finger ridges--those physical markings that never vary from childhood to death and that never are exactly duplicated in any two human beings. If fingerprints were found lacking at least the information would be obtained that the murderer had worn gloves in careful preparation for the crime. However, this chair was handled by detectives and by perhaps scores of the curious who thronged the house, even while the murdered tenant still lay stretched on the floor. When investigators thought to examine it, the chair was in another room.*

*Many other objects might have yielded fingerprint evidence--the recently used liquor glasses, for instance.*

**BLUNDER NO. 4**

*Fourth was the failure of authorities to obtain an accurate and complete photographic record of the scene of the crime as it was when discovered. Official photographs of the room and house from every angle before the body was removed or the position of anything altered would do much to aid in investigation. Only the camera lens records permanently; the human retina depends upon memory to retain its impressions and memory is often faulty, especially in murder cases. As it is there is only the description of the room made by the first few persons who found the body and unofficial newspaper photographs, sketches and diagrams made hours later.*

*The exact way in which the carpet was rolled under one foot of the murdered motion picture director might be highly important in establishing where Mr. Taylor stood when he was shot, or whether his body was carefully arranged after he fell.*

**BLUNDER NO. 5**

*The fifth serious blunder was the failure of the police to exclude the morbid and curious from the scene of the crime. The house was made a thoroughfare and playground for members of the public whose presence was unwarranted and interfered with the proper investigation. Because of this it would be almost impossible to say whether any article found missing from William D. Taylor's effects was removed by the murderer or by one of the souvenir-seeking spectators.*

**BLUNDER NO. 6**

*The sixth blunder in the investigation of this most mysterious crime was the lack of cooperation of various offices during the first week of the work. Four city offices were working on the case, possibly at cross-hazards most of the time. The city administrator's office was not certain that all papers were removed and in*

fact did not complete its work until yesterday--the seventh day. The police detective bureau, the prosecuting attorney's office and the sheriff's office have also worked on the case--all independently and without apparent cooperation. Happily an end is to be put to this condition at once.

However, the Mabel Normand letters were not discovered until yesterday, and then under circumstances indicating that they had been taken early in the investigation, examined and later surreptitiously planted so that officers could "find" them. An officer testified at the inquest that only one gun was found in the house--a Colt .32. Yesterday the officers discovered Taylor's Luger pistol, with its detachable rifle stock, which friends of the slain director had been asking about since the second day.

**BLUNDER NO. 7**

Seventh in the list of blunders is the inadequate way in which important witnesses were questioned and their testimony followed up. No secret was made by Taylor's chauffeur, Howard Fellows, of his return to the house about 8 o'clock of the murder night, when the telephone was unanswered, and his return of the car to the garage when the doorbell likewise was unanswered. Yet the murder was six days old before Howard Fellows was questioned by the police.

**BLUNDER NO. 8**

Eighth and perhaps most reprehensible in the series of blunders, is the fact that detectives recognized early in the investigation that information was being withheld, and took no steps to force witnesses to disclose all facts in their possession. At least one witness refused, point-blank, to answer the questions of detectives--not reporters--working on the case. And got away with it.

In view of these facts, and in spite of them the Los Angeles authorities do not run to earth the assassin of William D. Taylor, the scandal will be known to the entire nation. For the United States has its eyes on this mysterious murder case in which the "best loved man of the motion picture community" was coldly murdered from behind.

\* from *New York Herald*, February 10, 1922

*A dramatic clash between the police and the sheriff of Los Angeles is the newest feature in the kinema murder mystery.*

*The sheriff formally charges the police authorities with succumbing to the influence brought to bear by powerful interests connected with the kinema industry with the object of checking further investigation into the circumstances in which Mr. Desmond Taylor, or Deane-Tanner, the film director, was shot in his residence at Hollywood last week.*

*The most important clues, states the sheriff, have not been followed up, and blind trails have been started in order to lead investigations away from certain persons high in the industry and stop the publicity which the case is receiving to the detriment of the film industry.*

\* from *New York Morning Telegraph*, February 21, 1922

*The search -- if one can call it a search -- being made for the slayer of Motion Picture Director Taylor in Los Angeles is getting on the nerves of everybody, and the police should either produce the killer or turn the job of hunting for him over to competent persons. It seems as if every one who knew Taylor or could in any fashion be connected with the case has been interrogated at least a half dozen times. The police and the fame-seeking District Attorney of the California metropolis apparently have questioned persons who had no more to do with Taylor's murder than the residents of the Canary Islands. One Woolwine, District Attorney, made what he called an independent investigation, with a camera-man tagging him around and reporters in his following. Woolwine posed in the Taylor house with an assistant taking the part of the picture director, this being done to "reconstruct the crime." How would that help find the criminal? In their efforts the police and the Woolwine force have sent several reputable actresses into retirement, suffering from nervous prostration, and have cast some slight suspicion on a few persons who could not possibly kill another. The time has come for these Los Angeles sleuths and Woolwine and his actors to get off the job, and devote their time to whatever business may be at hand. Skilled detectives should take over the case and follow it to the end. Motion picture makers of Hollywood have raised a fund to hunt down Taylor's slayer, and they can put it to good use by dealing with a reputable detective agency and ignoring the incompetents of the police force and the District Attorney of Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup>*

\* from *Santa Monica Outlook*, February 22, 1922

*An article in a Canton, Ill, newspaper quoting a Los Angeles man in an attack on the film colony and the citrus conditions was the subject of resentment of F. H. Hamilton, secretary of the Sawtelle Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Hamilton has written letters to several newspapers and commercial bodies in this section calling their attention to this article.*

*Mr. Hamilton said that C. E. Snively, Jr. was formerly assistant chief of police in Los Angeles and his misrepresentations should be corrected.*

*The article in the Canton Daily Register containing the headline, "Says Film People Are Covering Up in Murder Mystery," reads as follows:*

*Regarding the Taylor murder case, C. E. Snively, Jr. of Los Angeles, writing his father, C. E. Snively of this city, says: "Everybody is stirred up over the Taylor murder mystery. It is a nasty, smelly mess, and the film people are doing a lot of 'covering up.' I do not believe Sands shot Taylor, but the blame may be attached*

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<sup>16</sup> For further articles on District Attorney Thomas Woolowine, and his sometime outrageous character and administration, see *Los Angeles Examiner*, June 24, 1915, *Los Angeles Record*, August 17, 1916, *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1916, *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1918, *Los Angeles Evening Herald*, March 16, 1921, *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 1922, *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 1923, *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 1923, *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 1925, *Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 1925.

to him to save others, and Sands will disappear on a life pension, or will turn up a suicide, or be assassinated to prevent the real story from coming out; that's my forecast."

\* from *Los Angeles Record*, Jan. 7, 1930

"You didn't tell this at the coroner's inquest?"

"No. They wouldn't let me. They tried to shake the story I told them before the inquest. They threatened me. I didn't change my story, because it was true, but I left out that part about the row at Mr. Taylor's house. Then I knew they would make more trouble for me, so I left Los Angeles right away."<sup>17</sup>

#### **Role of Charlotte Shelby and Mary Miles Minter in the case**

Mary Miles Minter and Charlotte Shelby have been frequently brought in as suspects to the case, and with good reason. Yet neither was very likely the killer, since based on what we are saying it would be too fantastic (at least in this writer's opinion) to think that they themselves would have been involved with the gang of burglars. In addition, it is somewhat difficult to conceive of, say, Charlotte Shelby being a methodical assassin or the cool customer Faith MacLean described exiting the bungalow.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Fragments of Marjorie Berger's Testimony**

\* from Los Angeles Police transcript of interview of Marjorie Berger, taken at her office, March 11, 1926, as recorded in King Vidor Papers, University of Southern California, Film Library, Special Collections

"Ques. What I want to find out Miss Berger is this...three questions I want to find out whether you called Mrs. Shelby or whether she called you in the morning the second of February...whether or not you knew at the hour you called whether Taylor's body was found.

"Ans. Will you let me alone for a few minutes while I talk to Mr. Marguetti? (attorney)

[appointment is made to answer question next day]

"Ques. I asked you yesterday the question whether or not you had ever a conversation with Mrs. Shelby on the morning of February 2, 1922, following the death of Taylor.

"Ans. I did

"Ques. At what time?

"Ans. At half past seven in the morning Mrs. Shelby called me.

"Ques. And would you care to relate to me what that conversation was, Mrs. Berger?

"Ans. Absolutely gladly. I arrived at my office between 7 and 7:30 on the morning of Feb. 2, 1922. My telephone was ringing. I answered the phone. Mrs. Charlotte Shelby said 'Marjorie, I have something terrible to tell you. The man that was in your office yesterday afternoon is no more. He is dead.' I said what do you mean? She said, 'He was found dead this morning.' I said, 'Who told you? What do you know about it? Where are you now?' She said 'I am at the New Hampshire home.' I said, 'Well, aren't you afraid to be alone?' She said, 'Well, Mr. Smith<sup>19</sup> stayed in the house last night.' I asked her whether she had informed the family of this terrible thing and she said yes. No, I better not say that, I think she said yes. I then hung up the receiver because I was greatly shocked and grieved. That's all.

"Ques. Was anything further said between you and her in connection with the case? I will say at or about that time did she tell you how she communicated or given the information to the rest of the family?

"Ans. I do not recollect. I am not sure. She did state that Lasky Studios had called her up and informed her about half an hour previous to her calling me.

[Berger goes on to state that Shelby called her around 6 or 6:30 and the other time at 8 or 8:30 (pm) looking for Mary, the night of the murder.]

Based on this testimony, Shelby, as well as Minter could have found out about the murder not longer after the Lasky people did that night through certain channels, including perhaps family friend District Attorney Thomas Woolwine. This was perhaps why Deputy District Attorney Jim Smith was with Shelby that night -- to

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<sup>17</sup> Peavey is talking about a quarrel between Mabel and Taylor. Whether true or no, his remarks clearly indicate there was a cover-up going on at the time of the Coroner's Inquest.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce Long: "Contrary to what has been extensively written and rumored, the Memorandum [Re. James Kirkwood and Mary Miles Minter] and written by Detective Lieutenant Leroy Sandersons] states that Faith MacLean said the person she saw 'could not have been a woman dressed in man's clothing.'" *Taylorology*, issue 97 (2007). In addition and with respect to Det. Cahill's hypothesis, if Shelby was disguised as a man would she have presented herself that way to Taylor when she allegedly embraced and shot him?

<sup>19</sup> i.e. Deputy District Attorney Jim Smith

protect her. Maybe Minter, along with other certain studio people, entered bungalow that night after the murder to see Taylor's body, which would account for the blonde hairs. Though granted unlikely, it ought not be assumed impossible.

As to the claim Shelby had most motive to kill Taylor, this Shelby later credibly answered herself when she said that if she had killed Taylor because of his alleged violating of Mary, why would she not have killed James Kirkwood, who had gotten Mary pregnant a number of years earlier? That she was jealous, as such as Det. William Cahill believed, may have some plausibility to it. Yet if Shelby was indeed the assassin, do we then assume the pre-murder burglaries are unrelated to Taylor's death, and that Shelby's acting not dissimilarly to the burglars was just a coincidence?

### **The Identity of the Murderer**

*"Undersheriff Biscailuz late in the day admitted the Sheriff's office is working hard on three 'leads' tending to connect prominent film people with the slaying. The Sheriff's office holds little credence in the theory that Sands committed the crime."*<sup>20</sup>

Almost right after the murder, any number of extraordinary stories and witnesses came forth, a pattern carried on for many years afterward. Apparently many stories were concocted by publicity seekers and newspaper people attempting to cash in on and exploit the drama. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that some of the stories were actually brought about through the efforts of the killer (and perhaps the efforts of his friends) in an effort to disguise the crime and further confuse the investigation.

If the killer was merely one among a gang of "poor" criminals (bootleggers, drug dealers) who would have felt the need to invent stories and produce false witnesses to protect them? Not probable since they would not have resources to employ actors and pretend witnesses or suspects. A very rich and powerful industry person, who hired a gunman, on the other hand, could more easily in such a position to effect such. The killer may have been found out within first day or so, but because he was so powerful, he could black mail others, including the D.A., and so the various cover-ups may have begun at this point. As well, if he were very powerful he could, and given his penchant for invading others' lives, use blackmail on other officials if, in a given instance, it was deemed necessary. By "the killer," I do not mean the gunman per se, but rather someone who employed the gunman.

It is conceivable then that if the killer was an industry higher-up that he participated in the cover-up on some level, and orchestrated false suspects and witness to confuse everyone. Because of perhaps a certain disdain for Normand and Taylor, some of his associates, whether knowing of his guilt or not, were perhaps more willing to cooperate than they otherwise might have been.

The following is a list of *some* of Hollywood's *known* most powerful figures at the time. This is not to necessarily imply guilt to anyone only to say who *might* have been in such a position to have pulled off such a scheme: Frank Garbutt, Jesse Lasky, Charles Eyton, Sol Wurtzel, Abraham Lehr, Carl Laemmle, Joseph Schenck, Mack Sennett, Thomas Ince, Richard Rowland. There is nothing particular about anyone of these to lead us offhand to think they would be suspects, except perhaps for Sennett. However, Sennett's being the killer is highly unlikely, for a number of reasons, not least of which is interpreting him as someone powerful enough to have manipulated city hall.

Where the inquiry can be continued from this point, I leave for others to take up and consider.

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No nation ancient or modern ever lost the liberty of freely speaking, writing, or publishing their sentiments, but forthwith lost their liberty in general and became slaves.

~ John Peter Zenger (1697-1746)

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<sup>20</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 9, 1922.

