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It's Still a Hot Chase On a Very Cold Trail For a Hollywood Killer

By CARYN JAMES

"Dear Desperate Desmond," the actress Mabel Normand wrote to the silent-film director William Desmond Taylor. "Sorry I cannot dine with you tomorrow. But I have a previous engagement with a Hindoo Prince." She signed it "Blessed Baby."

After Taylor was murdered in 1922—he was shot minutes after Normand walked out his door carrying a bag of peanuts and was driven away by her chauffeur—her love notes became known in newspapers as the "Blessed Baby Letters." The Blessed Baby's career was soon a shambles, but that probably had more to do with her cocaine addiction than the Taylor scandal. One rumor had it that Normand's drug dealer was a peanut vendor. Who knows what she carried in or out of her lover's house that night?

What anyone knows about the still unsolved killing is much less than what people have been guessing for nearly 70 years. Was the murderer a seduced virgin, her jealous mother, the gay butler, the drug-addicted actress, the blackmailing secretary or someone from William Desmond Taylor's mysterious past?

Now, a film series, a book and a movie-in-the-works are feeding new speculation about the case, which seems more and more like a game of Clue.

8 Films on 3 Weekends

On Saturday, the American Museum of the Moving Image begins a series called "Who Killed William Desmond Taylor?" which will run for three weekends, through June 3. The series features eight films directed by Taylor and four others starring Mabel Normand or Mary Miles Minter, the young actress who tried to displace Normand in Taylor's affections. Normand's career was a shambles, but that probably had more to do with her cocaine addiction than the Taylor scandal. One rumor had it that Normand's drug dealer was a peanut vendor. Who knows what she carried in or out of her lover's house that night?

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Sidney D. Kirkpatrick's 1986 book, "A Cast of Killers," in novelistic style, retraced the steps of the director King Vidor as he investigated the case in 1967, planning to turn the mystery into a film.

Mr. Kirkpatrick agrees with Vidor's conclusion, that the killer was Charlotte Shelby, Minter's suffocating stage mother, who was jealous of the 49-year-old Taylor's attention to her 19-year-old daughter. Little did Mabel Normand write to

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