

## Tumblety & the West End Nightlife

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As many of you know, Oscar Wilde was charged with 'Gross Indecency' in 1895 just as Francis Tumblety was in 1888. Incidentally, Chief Inspector John George Littlechild from Special Branch who considered Francis Tumblety the likely JTR suspect was hired -post Scotland Yard- by the prosecution to gather evidence against Wilde. Also, Oscar Wilde was charged at the Marlborough Street Court, which was the same courthouse Tumblety was charged at.

At the time of the Whitechapel murders, the West End was a well-known location for homosexual cruising, such as Hyde Park, Green Park, Soho, the Cleveland Street male brothel, the big hotels, the new toilets, trains and train stations. etc. The following excerpts from *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (2005), by Neil McKenna helps explain why Francis Tumblety would travel from his Birmingham residence to London. It also suggests why Scotland Yard had the ability to quickly get Tumblety on four separate counts of Gross Indecency. The example used in the excerpt of the 'Birmingham man' is enticing to connect with Francis Tumblety, but that's not my goal. It does show how these blackmailers preyed upon the well-to-do.

*The Labouchère Amendment of 1885 had quickly been dubbed 'The Blackmailer's Charter', and ever since its passage into law an increasing number of [homosexual] men had fallen prey to blackmail. Blackmailers, working singly or in pairs, were quick to cash in on the changes in the law. Blackmail became endemic...Men who had sex with other men had to learn very quickly how to live with the blackmailers, or perish –literally, in some cases- at their hands...The relationships between the blackmailers and the blackmailed were not, however, always clear-cut. Often, blackmailers and blackmailed enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, feeding off each other. For many Uranians, blackmail was neither more nor less sinister than prostitution, an extension to a codified system of risk and reward, of pleasure and payment. Blackmailers and male prostitutes were both called 'renters', a term which has survived to the present day in 'rent boy', meaning male prostitute.*

*Oscar [Wilde] understood and accepted blackmail as a natural consequence of his sexual choices. He was fascinated by male prostitutes. He knew and liked many boys who were notorious blackmailers and continued to like them even when they tried to blackmail him. And they, in turn, liked Oscar. He admired and applauded what he called 'their infamous war against life'. When Robert Cliburn told Oscar how he had blackmailed the Earl of Euston, who had figured prominently in the Cleveland Street Scandal, Oscar declared that Cliburn's determination, his avarice and his tenacity entitled him to the Victoria Cross.*

*Oscar was also fond of the weasly Fred Atkins, who was one of his favourite bed partners. Fred Atkins, alias Denny, and on high days and holy days, St Denis, was by turns a bookie's*

*clerk, a not very successful music hall artiste, a part-time female impersonator, a male prostitute and a half of a notorious and very successful blackmailing duet. With his partner, James Burton, known throughout London's underworld as 'Uncle' Burton, Fred Atkins would go out and pick up likely-looking gentlemen at the Empire Promenade, at the back of the circle at the Alhambra, or even in a public lavatory, and take them back to his lodgings. Once they were naked, and usually after sex, Burton would burst in and, claiming to be Fred's uncle, take a high moral tone over the outrage committed on his nephew. The upshot was that the hapless punter would pay up handsomely, glad to escape without the police being called. But things did not always work out like that.*

*Once, when Fred had picked up a gentleman from Birmingham, taken him back to his lodgings in Tachbrook Street, Pimlico and done the business, the Birmingham gentleman refused to be intimidated by the arrival of Uncle Burton. He was not an average punter. He demanded the return of his gold watch and chain, which Fred had pocketed, and there was a scene which was interrupted by the arrival of the landlady. Finding a middle-aged man and a youth semi-naked on a bed, and another man shouting at them, the landlady sent for the police. By the time Police Constables 396A and 500A from Rochester Row Police Station arrived, Fred and the Birmingham gentleman were fully dressed. It had all been a storm in a teacup, they said, an argument over a game of cards. Everything was now resolved. All the Birmingham gentleman wanted was his watch and chain and he would be on his way. But the two police constables marched Fred, Uncle Burton and the Birmingham gentleman round to Rochester Row police station where statements were taken –statements that would reappear during Oscar's trials.*

*...There were suspicions that in some large cities throughout the country [England], the police not only tolerated blackmailers, but actively encouraged them for the information they yielded about more prominent citizens. Uncle Burton himself was alleged to be a police informer.*

There was a homo/bi-sexual subculture going on in the West End and Scotland Yard knew all about it. Just eight months after the Whitechapel killings, the Cleveland Street scandal occurred.