

LIGHTNING STRIKES



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NOT ONCE BUT TWICE

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*In cities vice is hidden with most ease
Or seen with least reproach; and virtue, taught
By frequent lapse, can hope no triumph there
Beyond th' achievement of successful flight.*

*The Task
William Cowper 1785*

SURPLUS OF FOOD caused specialization of labour and a new social class structure which gave rise to the first true cities. Cities since that time have been centres of attraction that drew people in for various reasons, mostly social or economic in nature. This magnetic nature had the effect of consolidating city centres. The centre, in smaller cities, may have been the town square which also served as marketplace and where other major festivities, such as public hangings, were held. Along with economic and social prosperity came also the means to afford and satisfy one's unvirtuous tendencies. This further generated more economic prosperity for some as entertainment of various calibres was marketed, the stalwart being that of ladies of loose morals and loose dress.

As cities grew, they tended to decentralize somewhat. The town square remained but other centres - big or small - developed. Certain were known for their specialized activities. Even today, our cities have their financial districts, shopping streets, hotel and entertainment areas, red-light districts and so on. The setting of the sun gives cities a nightlife.

As can be deduced, nightlife districts are certainly not recent inventions. Since prostitution is ill-reputedly the world's oldest profession (after law) it may be safe to assume that red-light districts have existed for some time. Of today's more colourful and better defined red-light districts, we have Hamburg's notorious **Reeperbahn**; Amsterdam's red-light district where red lights actually do shine and svelte professionals pose promiscuously in the front windows of row houses fronting on small streets or lovely canals; and Paris's **Pigalle** with its romantic

history due to its Montmartre location and resident dignitaries such as Toulouse-Lautrec.

However, when analysed, these red-light districts are basically one-industry towns based on vice of the carnal persuasion. As such, they don't really qualify as complete nightlife districts because they lack variety and depth. There are few city precincts that have the democratic depth - the highs and the lows - to encompass a wide spectrum of nightlife. One such city centre is found in New York.

Manhattan's asphalt grid is the rolling surface for the city's horde of automobiles. The meandering diagonal path of Broadway crosses Seventh Avenue to form a long intersection and it is here that, at night, that New York fluoresces orgiastically. Here one finds legitimate theatres, posh restaurants, fast food outlets, cinemas, peep shows, strip joints, rooms, hotels, baths, stores, bars, clubs, and discotheques - all united by some sort of glitter that is a schizoid scuffle of advertising.

The Times Square area was once occupied by stables and was known as Long Acres (in parallel with a similar area in London). The first theatres and restaurants were built in the 1890's and the New York Times moved in in 1903. This was and still is the theatre district of New York, commonly known as 'Broadway'. The Broadway theatre, although still a major part of New York's cultural life, is not what it was many years ago. The decline began in the 1920's with the advent of talking movies. The Great Depression was a further blow and many of the theatres on 42nd Street became movie theatres and burlesque houses. 42nd Street in the

Times Square neighbourhood is still the most porno-flick oriented two blocks in the city. The coming of television further lessened the importance of Broadway and in a fifty year span the number of legitimate theatres decreased from about eighty to thirty-five, with only about half open with Broadway productions. However, through special zoning four new theatres, the first to be built in the area in over forty years, opened in 1972 and housed in new, flaccid skyscrapers. In the face of the theatre's decline, Times Square diversified over the years. Over one-third of Manhattan's movie houses are located in the area. The physical fabric and the texture of the place have changed since the early days. It is now dead flash at night and somewhat drab and transparent during the day. Scars and holes are covered by a blanket of darkness after sundown when Times Square earns its keep.

When in Times Square one encounters many types of people from many avenues of life. The distinguished members of the drugmasters' guild graciously offer their bonbons and magic powders and live up to their motto: "Coke adds life where there isn't any." Groups of youths from the city's ghettos hang around the subway exit blasting forth bop and boogie to the passing populace. Assorted pornophiles - civilians and professionals - go about their business or pleasure. Affluent theatre-goers stop in at an 'in' restaurant or discotheque before retiring to their high rise apartments on the East Side to rest for the next day's luncheon with the partners of their legal or architectural firm or perhaps for a day's shopping at Bloomingdale's for the little lady with the big account. Tourists and conventioners carefully but casually

