
AMSTERDAM

of

ANGELS



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— of —
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The past is a foreign country; they do things different there.
(LP Hartley)

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY AMSTERDAM

During the seventeenth century, Amsterdam was a bustling port and center of trade: wealthy, expansive and corrupt to the bone. The city faced directly on to the inland Zuiderzee and ships sailed up the Damrak. Thriving markets offered a huge selection of goods: from Dutch herring and barley to cloves and nutmeg from the colonies, from outrageously priced tulip bulbs to shares in non-existent companies. If there was money, you would find Dutchmen.

An active immigration policy supplied the city with international craftsmanship. They invited Venetian glass blowers and gold hide wallcovering specialists from Belgium. You would come across Russian, Spanish, Turkish, Persian and Indian traders in Amsterdam. Penniless Jews from Eastern Europe tried to make a living busking. The streets of Amsterdam were crawling with workers and peasants from Germany, Poland, Belgium and Scandinavia.

Calvinism was the state religion. Its austere principles were in stark contrast to this gluttonous wealth. The fear of God was always present. The very nature of trading however, required religious tolerance. Fleeing religious repression, the Huguenots had come to Amsterdam, just as the Portuguese Jews who sometimes brought along their enslaved servants. And although Catholicism was outlawed, there were many concealed churches. Everyone knew of their existence as the psalms could be heard from afar.

Most migrants were in quest of money; the rich came looking for more and the poor trying to scrape together enough for survival. They mingled in one cultural melting pot. With little money they would live in the cellars or under the rafters, the wealthy would live on the bel-etage. Social strata would mix in the streets and in the public houses. It was busy everywhere: in just a hundred years the population had increased six-fold, mainly through migration. At the close of the seventeenth century the city counted 200.000 inhabitants living within the city walls. Probably more than in the twenty-first century in that same area.

Amsterdam had a 4.5 kilometer waterfront. As soon as migrants set foot on shore, it was up to them to harness their frequently overwhelming urge to survive. They may have walked from the IJ, through the Houwtuinen and Haarlemmerstraat, past West-Indisch Huis, towards the Prinsengracht-Brouwersgracht corner, to Papeneiland, the northernmost section of Jordaan. There were many doss-houses and inns there as well as eighteen playhouses.

PLAYHOUSE

When entering Café 't Papeneiland, your vision has doubled even before ordering a first drink. Old Amsterdam genius loci lives here. The atmosphere of the late seventeenth century



Amsterdam phenomenon, the playhouse can be tasted here. Foreign travellers called them musick houses or musico. Playhouses were a popular venue for practicing double standards. Calvinist Dutch values were trodden on. Patronage was diverse: rich and poor, regulars and visitors, both men and women. There was music, dancing, drinking and brawling.

There was courting as well, but that took place in a separate room, upstairs. There were usually eight to ten young women, average age of 23, working in a playhouse. Three quarters would be migrants. Some playhouses had paintings of them on the wall, so you could take your pick, like the picture menus you can see in Chinese restaurants on the Zeedijk.

Playhouse customers also loved to gamble. The landlord or –lady would always have backgammon boards, dice and playing cards available. Main revenue however came from the sale of liquor. Amsterdam was referred to as *suyptstad* (booze-town): the average annual beer consumption amounted to 300 liters per person, a solid basis, topped up with wine, brandy and gin.

There was always music in the background: maximum noise with minimal means. There would usually be a harpsicord in the tavern. Travelling musicians tried to earn their income by playing violin, trumpet, bass, oboe or dulcimer. There would be dancing and a lot of stamping. Sailors had learned to dance in tight quarters; they hardly moved. One can read about ring dancing, I imagine a sort of drunken procession through the inn. Judicial archives report many complaints about noisy disturbances.

AMSTERDAM WHOREDOM

In the anonymous 1681 book, *'t Amsterdamsch Hoerdom* (Amsterdam Whoredom), a traveller meets an envoy of the devil who takes him on a tour around Amsterdam playhouses and brothels. The booklet, which discretely fitted in any coat pocket, was a national and international bestseller. It enjoyed many reprints and translations in French and German. Vividly depicted details were presented by the author as warnings about Amsterdam nightlife. Readers were encouraged to heed the warnings and use them to their own advantage. It is the seventeenth century *Rough Guide to Amsterdam*.

Among historians, it is generally acknowledged to have been written by someone from the judicial system as many anecdotes and detailed descriptions agree with confession books from the late seventeenth century. Historians have widely accepted this guide as an invaluable historical source.

The city it describes is my truly familiar home turf. And yet, when I read it, I feel as if I am in a parallel universe, with different laws. Survival is only for the fittest, humor is cruel. The playhouse women pee and relieve themselves in the street. They booze, puke and request a glass of fresh rainwater to rinse their mouths after which they can continue their binges.

Quarreling and scratching each other in the face, they dare each other to smash most glasses.

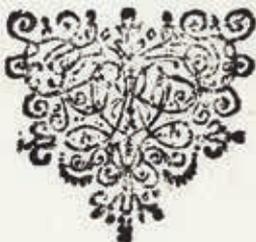
Prostitutes are portrayed as lecherous women who are out to exploit and rob their customers in the same way as they appear in contemporary brothel-scene paintings. It is by presenting an opposite view that *Angels of Amsterdam* aims to redress this image of women. When looking over Maritgen's, Juliana's, Elsje's or Pussy Sweet's shoulder, we look straight into the luminous yellow eyes of the Guide to the Underworld.



't Amsterdamsch
HOERDOM.

Bebelzende

De listen en strecken, daar zich
de Hoeren en Hoere-Waardinnen
van dienen; benevens der
zelve maniere van leeven,
dwaaze bygelovigheden,
en in 't algemeen alles
't geen by dese Juffers
in gebruik is.



A M S T E R D A M,
Gedruckt voor de Liefhebbers,

AMSTERDAM WHOREDOM

(*t Amsterdamsch Hoerdom*) Anonymous, 1681

MEETING THE CONDUCTOR

On his way from Rotterdam to Amsterdam on a canal barge, a traveller overhears two young men discussing playhouses which have angelic girls who dance magnificently, sing beautifully and drink such quantities as to even make Germans look like teetotallers. The traveller decides to make haste in doing his business in Amsterdam by finishing them in just three days instead of six, so he has the opportunity to satisfy his curiosity about this nightlife. The night of the third day he falls into a deep sleep.

Page 7 – 9

After having dreamed for, I estimate some hour and a half about the strangest of things, which in some way did all relate to that which had kept my thoughts occupied for the last three days, I saw a tall young man entering my room. His dress had a color which I can not describe as it was an amalgam of many different colors. He wore a great wig on his head, curly in a way to resemble Envy, as the hairs were so thick that they could be mistaken for tiny snakes. His crown was covered by a hat of most unusual tallness, as they used to wear in days gone by.

Instantly he approached my bed, and having taken me by the arm he said: Get up, in case you want to see that which you long for so much. I observed him obliquely and continued to inform as to his name and whence he came. I am, he responded, commander in chief of subterranean spirits who have been appointed by Pluto to report on all proceedings within houses frequented by trollops, and to whose care is entrusted the generation of disputes, fights, blasphemies, in short all abominations which serve the propagation of our realm. Make haste therefore, he continued, as I will, in a state of invisibility, show you everything in Amsterdam, as far as it concerns these things. So I can teach you better about all we will see, we will be able to talk, without being overheard by anyone.

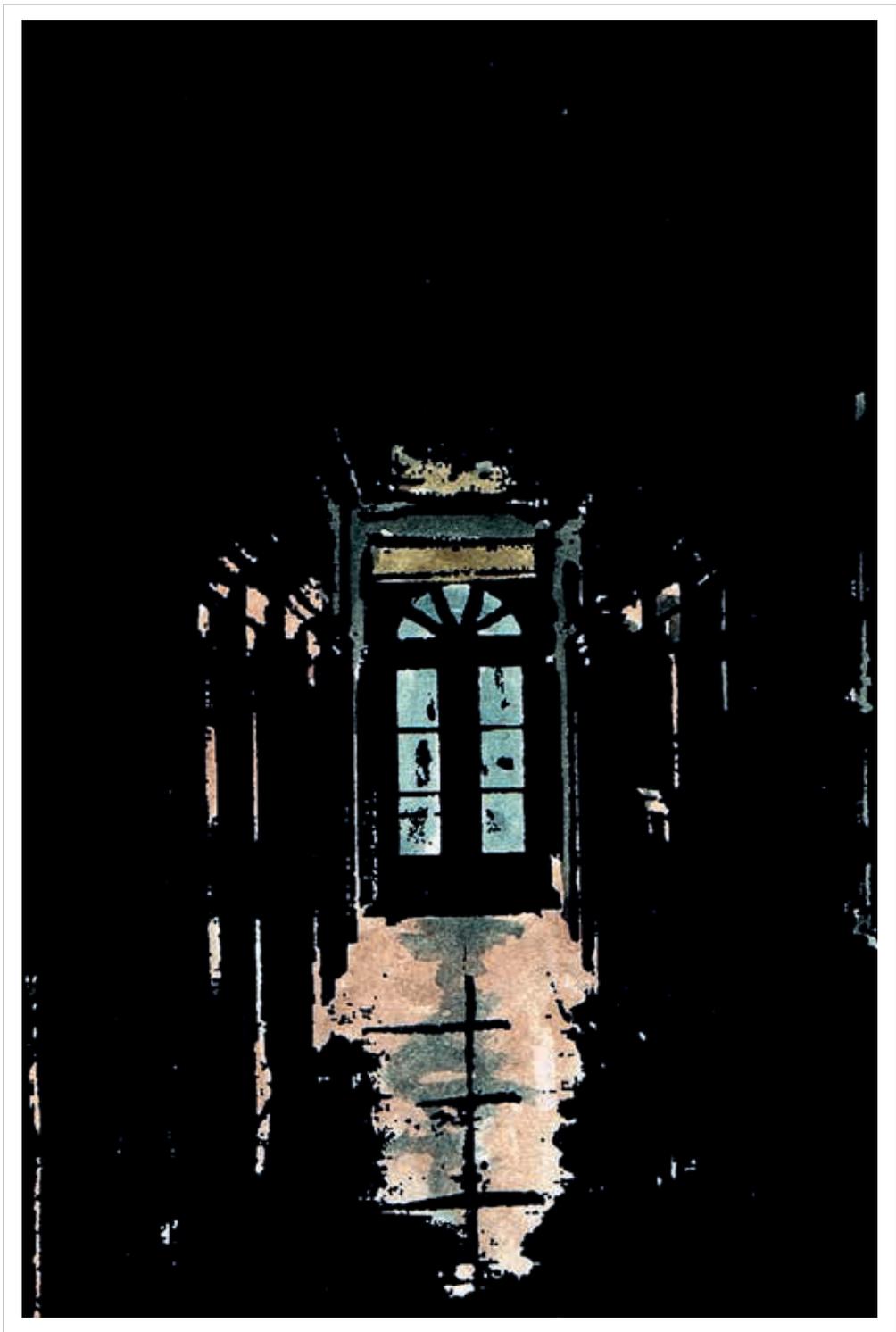
Not wanting to waste this great opportunity, I prepared to follow this panjandrum, immediately after jumping from my bed.

EXCURSION THROUGH HAARLEMMER QUARTER

The conductor and the traveller embark on a trip around playhouses, inns and whorehouses of Amsterdam's red-light district. As they operate in stealth-mode, no one can hear or see them and they can sneak in everywhere. Their route takes them from the east end of town, past the Kolk, through the Karnemelksesteeg, to the Houttuinen and Haarlemmerdijk which, so our conductor warns us, is reckoned to be one of the most nefarious of places.

Page 191 – 201

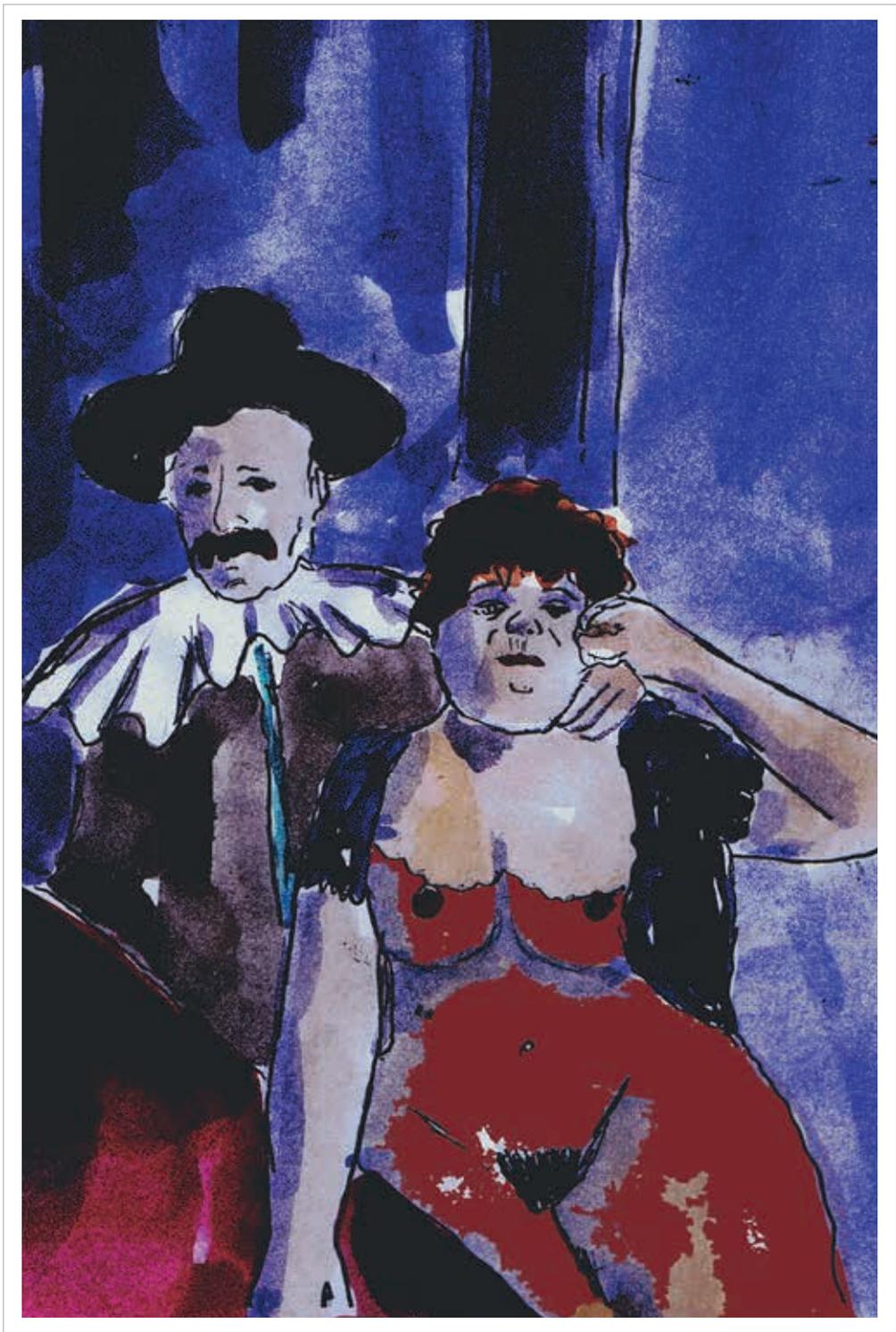
Absorbed in conversation we came to a canal near the IJ, which reeked strongly of herring. Somewhere halfway the length of this canal my conductor led me to a great warehouse, which we entered through a porch, constructed within the door so there was no view from the street on what went on inside. To the left of this porch, there laid a number of casks, and also an upright barrel supporting numerous filled rummers. I meant to ask an explanation from my



conductor, when I saw a boatswain crossing the threshold and demanding a glass of wine. Look brother, the landlord said, you will lay down three farthing before I serve you. What? I said, you pay in advance here? Most certainly, my conductor said, not a drop is to be had otherwise, and when the innkeeper holds you a grudge, he will demand to see where you've left your rummer before allowing you to leave, as they tend to be taken by the Company. Meanwhile I noticed this warehouse had an ingenious division: lining the wall to the left, there was a multitude of small tables, similar to the ones found in tavern gardens and to the right there were two or three long tables set along the wall which, like the small tables, already hosted many whores, who, when acknowledged or chatted to, would get up and join anyone indiscriminately. They were however such moth-eaten creatures that any honest man, no matter how hungry he was, would have drawn his knife to them.

Lining the floor, in the middle, I noticed numerous chaps moving around and talking to each other without drinking anything, as none of them held a glass of wine. The other guests were mainly sailors and peasants, who, holding their caps to their knees and in company of one of these little Venuses, sang along loud and clear. So who are these creatures, I asked my conductor and what are these guys doing here, walking around? They are mostly whores, he replied, from the Hasselaarssteeg, from the Haarlemmerdijk, from the Houttuinen, that kind of folk. And these chaps are the wardens, who come here every evening to prevent fights and, in case one develops, will bravely bash away with their solid cudgels, especially if knives are drawn. They get paid a certain sum of money because, as the place is frequented by many a malicious guest, there would be many accidents if the innkeeper would not instantly have order restored by these fellows. That's good, I replied, and the landlord thus shows he has enough sense to run a business such as this. But, I continued, is there no limit on the number of whores that are allowed to come here? Because there were so many of these vermin I saw. Not at all, my conductor said, not even a single one more can enter than the landlord wishes to allow, unless she arrives in company of a man and also departs thus. As for the others who arrange their rendez-vous here, they all pay two farthing to the house, which gives them freedom to spend all evening here, and to depart with one of the guests until whatever the time, without the obligation to stay longer than they want or to drink more than they want or can hold. They are however hardly in need of this as there is rarely too much drinking. They suffer from thirst more than that they get too much. So when these creatures, my conductor continued, drag someone back to their place, the wardens will silently slip ahead and hide in a corner or room, to watch out for quarrels about remuneration, something that happens frequently. If the guests pay without much ado, the wardens stay out of sight and when they come out of hiding, you know you'll be in for trouble.

Three young gents, who arrived at a small table near us, caused me to look their way in case anything might occur here. They had hardly sat down before four harlots descended on the table and got going. Move over there boys, the sweetest looking of the four said and let us taste whether the wine the landlord is serving you is wet and cold. It certainly has those two



qualities, one of the gents replied, but in my opinion the taste is quite bland. That is odd, the woman continued, as it was admired by all guests just yesterday and I doubt he will have cracked a new cask so soon. Then taste it, the gent said, you will find I am telling the truth. The poor fellow however did not realize that the whore had a devious intention by tasting the wine, as no sooner had she taken the glass than she downed its whole contents. Your mouth is to blame, my lord, she said. That wine is excellent. I would never have drunk so much as I generally dislike the taste of wine. I suppose I can see your point, the gentleman said, but would you now please get moving and fetch us a refill? Yes please, and right away sir, the gluttonous creature said, give me some of that balm that buys one butter, as the host will for the Devil draw no drop if he sees no money. While this one was away fetching wine, the other three bravely started soliciting the gents to come home with them. But they seemed to be uninterested. Because they ridiculed everything the harlots proposed to them. Do this sort of gentleman frequent this place as well? I asked my conductor. Sometimes, he responded, though very rarely it occurs to get happy with these creatures, but only from curiosity. Because this house is renowned through the whole city and it is also publicly acclaimed that Amsterdammers (I speak of the decent folk, not the riffraff) will not easily let themselves be cheated here, although occasionally a stranger might find the beginnings of a disastrous night here.

The sounds of a bass, washboard and of a fiddle, which suddenly burst out and made me interrupt my conductor's deliberation, to ask him whether they kept musicians here and if business was lucrative enough for three of them to earn their wages. They are not employed here, my conductor said, but come round nearly every night to see whether there is some money to be made from the guests, because the place is frequented regularly by sailors and navvies and these folks are never merry without frisking and dancing, there is always a penny or two to be made by these worms. These musicians, I remarked, are well bearded and seem to be part savage. No wonder, my conductor said, they are smouzer or High German Jews and they all have bearded chins. Some longer than others, but they all keep them carefully and are very proud of them as they imagine it to be very elegant and masculine to wear a billy-goat's length of hair on the chin.

Page 203 – 213

While we were conversing thus, three of the sailors had started dancing with as many shabby trollops, but as I had been surprised by the way I had seen four persons dancing earlier, I was even more amazed now, as these six twirled and thrashed around so wondrously that I could make head nor tails of their dance. And yet there was surely some order in this chaos as otherwise, they would most surely have become entangled, seeing the most wonderful reeling and tumbling I had ever witnessed.

I was observing this intently, when my attention was drawn to the screeching of two women, as if there were two armies engaged in battle. Before I could ascertain the cause of this tumult

however, they had clutched each other grimly by the hair. No doubt a bloody battle would have ensued had not the gentlemen whose business it was to prevent all fighting, jumped in. As it was, it turned out to be no easy task as each received at least three, rather excellent boxes on the ear. What the Devil, the one woman said, will I for ever need to suffer from this damned bitch stealing my fodder? I have spent all night with him and now she wants to go off with him. But no, she continued, as long as I have my hands, I will wage my battle before giving in. Well, well, said the other whore, I look forward to that. Whether you sat with him or not, he is equally dear to me, and if I can take him along, I won't let go just because of you. In that case, your gob will be collecting flies, said the woman who had spoken first. I'll crap on your mug, the other said, you understand? And I'll wipe my arse on your face, and if there is something you want to say to me, the street is wide enough. Don't even think, the lady of the house, who was attracted by the bedlam and mingled in the discussion said, of messing around my door, or I will have you beaten as flat as kippers. Damned bitches. You cause me more trouble than any of the others. I won't cause trouble at your door, said the one whore, but we'll meet up again somewhere else. I really don't care an ounce, the landlady continued, but I swear on my bleedin' heart that if you try anything on my doorstep, you'll be in for a treat. What's going on? I asked my conductor, why are these women in a flap? It's all about that Frisian skipper, he responded. The one woman thought she would go off with him, while the other had spent all evening with him and she would not put up with this chunk being stolen from her plate. That doesn't seem too unreasonable, I said. If I were to be a judge in this dispute, I would pass judgment in her favor. You could well pass a judgment, he resumed, only to have it ignored because no one can be forced into affections. If that skipper would not have preferred the latter woman, he would not have been convinced so quickly to change his mind, as they talked only as long as the first was away for the time she needed to make water. When here, they certainly need to watch their bladders sharply, I said. As sharply as anywhere else, my conductor replied. They are jolly well made to do so, as their pimps, in case they let any opportunity slip away, will upon arrival at home, belt them as if bashing them to tatters.

These words had hardly left my conductor's mouth than we heard the chiming of a small bell, which nudged me immediately into asking what the meaning was. Nothing more, my guide said, than that the clock has struck half past nine and that everyone should be making their way home. You mean, I said, no more servings after half nine and you get sent off, whether you want to or not? You can finish your drink decently, my guide said, but no one is served after the chime, unless you want to down the glass in one gulp at the bar, as this warehouse closes at ten o'clock. It is this decree, he continued, that keeps this establishment alive as if they were to stay open as many other places do, it would surely go out of business rapidly. Despite the good precautions of the landlord, there would undoubtedly be daily fights and furor. Because it is frequented mainly by rough and uncivilized folk and due to the length of time, there would be much more drinking, and as these fellows will often come in drunk, even exercising the most prudence in the world, it would be impossible to avert rioting which in

turn would attract the law to bring back order.

Come my friends, the landlord said while we were talking, it's time, drink up and go. And, as he turned towards the whores and continued, you first, as always. You just keep standing here as if digesting money. Things would only keep on getting worse here. The whores then immediately left, followed by the pimps. We slipped out with them and saw nearly all of them lined up, waiting for the guests who were still finishing their drinks inside. Just to see, my conductor said, whether any of them was silly enough to go off with them.

Where will these creature go now? I asked. It is still early. I can't believe they will all go home! Not at all, my guide responded. They will hang around in the area another two or three hours, looking for passersby to drag back home with them, or to pick pockets while these harlots grope their meat, as some of these fools can't constrain themselves to commit this kind of silliness by the roadside for small money. Not to mention things that are a thousand times worse. Meanwhile, the pimps followed at a distance, to help the whores out in case these fellows realised they were being robbed. And sometimes, they will not only get thoroughly beaten up, but they might also land up losing their hats, cloaks and what have you as they can use everything. That is surprising, I said. There are so many wardens along the street who are paid to prevent disorderly conduct. They must make their rounds in the whole precinct every quarter of an hour, my guide continued, and there is no way they can always be right where they are needed. And, he added, notwithstanding the good, there are many of these fellows who will refuse to offer necessary and proper assistance in cases such as these. Amsterdam, Amsterdam, I thought to myself, what profanity goes on within your walls? And what a token of God's general mercifulness to you that you are not punished by the harshest of plagues for all these abominations.

Angels of Amsterdam

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