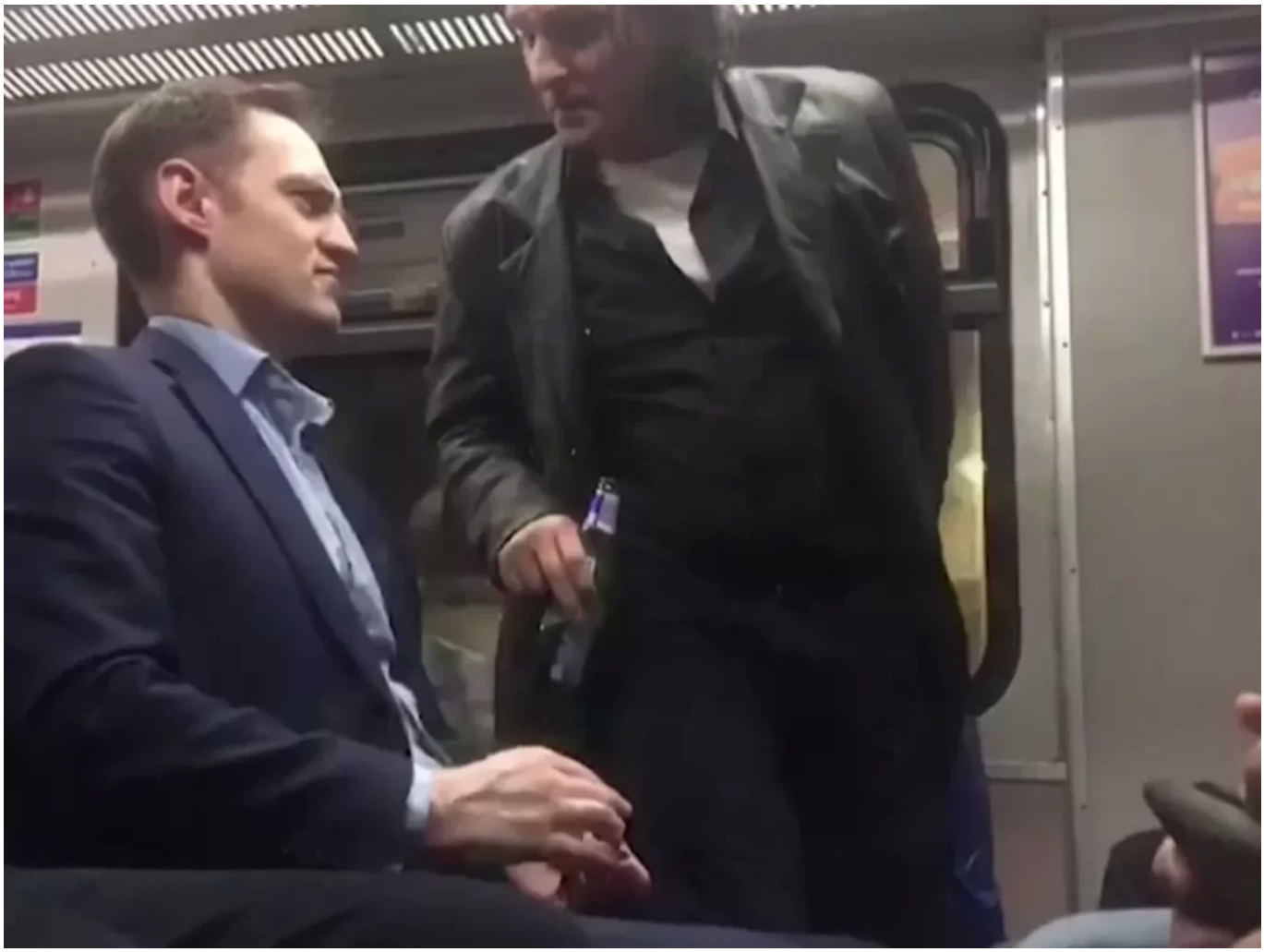
A Tale of Two Drunks



by Theodore Dalrymple

Personal experience is no guide to statistical reality, a lesson brought home to me recently once again by a trip to London. When I arrived back home from my trip, a copy of *The Spectator* was waiting for me, and its cover story was about the decline of drinking in Britain.

Suffice it to say that this did not entirely coincide with my experience on the train to and from London. Per capita sales of alcohol in Britain may have declined from their peak in 2004, but the Indian lady on the way to the city had clearly bought quite a lot of vodka for the journey. The drunk on the way back had probably shoplifted his alcohol, to judge by his unsolicited autobiographical remarks.

My guess is that the lady on the way to London was probably Sikh, or at least Punjabi, for I have noticed that among Indians who drink heavily, they are very prominent. I once had a Sikh patient dying of liver failure with a bottle of whisky on his bedside table who adamantly denied that he had ever let a drop pass his lips and that therefore his illness was unjust.

The drunk lady was very loud. She was in a party of four, but the other three were not drinking. Her laugh rose from a cackle to a scream that lasted until she took her next swig. I don't think I have ever heard anything so funny that it would justify such loud laughter. To me, her laughter sounded almost hysterical: laughter in search of something to laugh about.

Her sober companions did nothing to restrain her. Perhaps they couldn't. I thought of Mr Bumble, the beadle in *Oliver Twist*, when told in court that the law supposed that a man was in control of his wife. "If the law supposes *that*," said Mr Bumble, "the law is a ass—a idiot."

My wife approached her—she was not malign-looking—and said mildly that she was making an awful lot of noise. The lady replied by holding out her bottle and saying, "Would you like a drink, love?" There was clearly no point in expostulating further or trying to put an end to her one-woman party, and we even began to think that the problem was with us, that we were strait-laced puritan killjoys. It was eleven in the morning, however.

By the time we reached London, the lady was so far gone that it had to be explained to her why the train had stopped, and she had to be guided reluctantly out of the carriage like a baby out of the womb during a difficult delivery.

On the way back, there was a man sitting behind us whose condition one would not have needed a breathalyzer to diagnose. His general appearance was of a dishevelment that

was not that of a moment. He was informing the carriage that he was English, and a good lad, really; when the ticket inspectress came, he informed her that he didn't have a ticket but that he was going to Lichfield.

The train, however, did not go to Lichfield, and with admirable calm and politeness, the inspectress found the route that the passenger might take to the city of Dr Johnson's birth. Of course, she knew that this was pointless, that he was merely making an excuse for being on the train without a ticket. Once she had gone, he announced that he was trying to get to Glasgow, another of the many cities to which the train was not going.

"I'm English," he said, "I'm a good lad, I am." He said this as if the quality of being good and English were synonymous—or perhaps oxymoronic.

Then he approached another passenger and asked him whether he had enjoyed himself in London. "Did you do any robberies, burglaries, or shootings?" This was obviously his idea of having a good time. Then he said, "I'm a good lad, I am, English, not a nonce."

Nonce is English prison slang for a sexual offender, a word I have not heard used outside of prison, so that clearly this man had been in prison. Perhaps his state of drunkenness—he swayed like a leaf in the autumn wind—was in celebration of his release from what many who live in its shadow call "the big house."

I did not reply to his repeated efforts to engage me in conversation. To him, I must have seemed censorious, priggish, or stand-offish (I have never been very good at conversing with drunks). Fortunately, we got off at the next stop, just as the police, who evidently had been called by the inspectress, were getting on.

When I saw them, I was struck by a feeling of the futility of

it all. They would haul him off the train, take him down to the police station, book him, and either let him back on the streets, to continue making his mild mayhem, or put him in the cells to sleep it off. If they brought him before the magistrates, he would be fined, but would not pay his fine. A warrant for his arrest might then be issued, but it would never be executed. What was the point of all this, beyond giving several people a certain amount of form-filling to do? On the other hand, it would hardly be right for no public notice whatever to be taken of him.

This not very clever man easily ran rings round a state that collected and spent untold billions, and yet was powerless to do anything about him. Of this, I was secretly glad. It was not that he added to the gaiety of the nation, exactly, but that I had rather a state that was sometimes helpless than one that was ruthlessly omnicompetent. He was a free man—far freer than most of the people who inwardly tut-tutted at his behavior.

Two drunks don't make a social trend. It is well to remember that when next you make a pronouncement on the state of society on the basis of your personal experience, which—if you are anything like me—you will do very soon.

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