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Nina Ponomareva's Hats

THE case of Nina Ponomareva and her five hats caused some amusement in Fleet Street, where sub-editors toyed with such headings as "the slipped discus thrower." In New York it prompted an editorial writer to reflect on the power of "the eternal feminine" to survive indoctrination. At higher levels there was speculation on a possible rupture of Anglo-Soviet relations. But the most sensible comment was simply that this was the silliest row in the history of diplomacy. There may have been more fantastic incidents, for history is much affected by the trivial, even though historians do not always notice it; but it is doubtful if any similar case has been handled so badly.

The discus thrower may have taken the hats, or she may have imagined that she was buying them. It seems to have been established that Nina Ponomareva spoke no English, and that the shop detective who detained her spoke no Russian. The possibilities of misunderstanding were obvious. Once the matter was in the hands of the police the facts could only be sifted in Court; but by then the Russians were affronted, their team had been withdrawn from the Anglo-Soviet athletic meeting, Nina had been hurried out of sight, and Whitehall was in a state of agitation. The hats were worth about thirty shillings.

The processes of English law are superbly detached; we have all been taught to respect them, and to see in their strict impartiality the assurance of justice. But the Government has power to intervene when diplomatic issues are raised, and experience has shown that where foreign susceptibilities are concerned the intervention should be prompt and decisive. Official spokesmen were said in the cabled reports to have explained that the Government had no power to have the charges of shoplifting withdrawn. Yet two

days later another spokesman was saying that "it was possible for the office (of Public Prosecutions) to drop the charges." Why this was not done before the affair was making a noise throughout the world, it is difficult to imagine.

If an Englishman abroad, minding his own or other people's business, is arrested and imprisoned without trial, a great cry goes up about the affront to freedom and human dignity. It is to be hoped that some day these things will not happen, and that principles under which the law is administered in democratic countries will be universally accepted. In the meantime, however, it is necessary to remember that the English legal system is inscrutable to citizens who live under a system entirely different. Nina Ponomareva and her team-mates could not be asked to understand police and courtroom procedures which are as implacable in pursuit of the small offender as in seizing and punishing the dangerous criminal. For them the charge was either a mistake or an insult, and if it were a mistake they would expect it to be put right as tactfully as possible. If an offence had been committed, justice could have been done without commotion. A team of athletes goes out from Russia as an official party, or at least under official patronage and supervision; and although it is not entitled to diplomatic immunity, a mistake or an offence by any member of the group could be corrected by internal action and discipline. Whatever happens, the results of this affair can only be unhappy. Small irritations are often harder to bear than large strains, and they grow by accretion into prejudices which become obstacles to agreement. A little more tact, based on an ability to imagine that our own ways of doing things are not necessarily explicable or acceptable to the rest of mankind, would sometimes be more useful than a whole series of international conferences.

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