



July 1914

SIR,—Women in general will be grateful for your unqualified disapproval of Girl Scouts. But is it not an anxious sign of the times if the mothers of girls between the ages of twelve and sixteen have not sufficient control to prevent their daughters from taking part in a pursuit of which they disapprove, especially one so eminently unsuitable as scouting for girls?

—I am, Sir, &c.,

A.K.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR, PUBLISHED
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ON THE CRYSTAL PALACE SCOUT RALLY

“**W**hat are they doing?” Annie said, staring in fascination at the group of girls stomping down the road. Then she added with a giggle, “What are they *wearing*?”

Phyl, her older sister, shook her head. “I don’t know. They’re . . . marching, I suppose. Look at their skirts! And those hats. They don’t look proper.”

“They look like boys.” Annie put her head on one side and squinted into the bright sun to get a better look at the dark blue woollen skirt of the closest girl. Even though she seemed about fifteen, a young lady rather than a child, her skirt was halfway up her legs. “I don’t think they’ve got petticoats on,” she whispered.

“Not proper at all!” Phyl could hear herself sounding exactly like her mother.

Mrs Dean made sure that her Phyllis and Annie were always dressed as they should be. Good plain dresses, layers of clean petticoats, frilled white pinafores fresh every day. Boots nicely polished and stockings with no holes. Bows in their hair. It all took time and effort and money. But it was important. Appearances *mattered*.

Still, the way those girls were striding along so fast, without masses of petticoats catching at their legs . . . Phyl couldn’t help envying how free they seemed. But Annie was right, they did look like boys. Especially with those awful broad-brimmed hats on.

“What you got that stick for?” someone yelled from the other side of the road, and Phyl flinched at the rough anger in the boy’s voice. She reached out to grab Annie, who was skipping along the pavement, trying to get a better look, and hauled her back by her pinafore.

“Stop it!” Annie squirmed, trying to break free. “I want to *see*, Phyl.”

“We need to get home,” Phyl muttered, looking up and down the road. The fifteen or so girls were marching faster now and were nearly level with them. They’d obviously heard the shouts too. The boy doing the shouting had been joined by a couple of others who’d been lurking on the corner, as if waiting for a chance to cause trouble.

“I wondered about the sticks too. They’ve all got them, look,” Annie said, still without any hint of fear. “They’re bigger than walking sticks and they’re not really using them to walk with.”

“Annie, come on!” Phyl hissed.

The three boys were hooting with laughter now. The oldest girl flung her arm around the littlest one, hurrying her along, but the boys started chasing after them. The first one darted forward, pulling at the older girl’s skirt. He then aimed a kick at the shocking amount of leg on display.

Phyl sucked in a sharp breath, as if she was the one who’d been kicked. Clearly the boy thought it didn’t matter. The *girl* didn’t matter, since she’d dared to dress like that.

“Leave us alone!” the oldest girl snapped, reaching down to rub her leg. “You should be ashamed.” She had a clear, high voice and sounded a bit like Phyl’s teacher. She wasn’t a shopkeeper’s daughter, that much was obvious.

“So should you, carrying on like that!” he snarled back. “What you going to do about it, miss? Hit me with your stick? Get on home to your mother!”

Phyl glanced around anxiously. There were a couple of women further down the street, watching. They looked disapproving, but Phyl couldn’t tell if it was the jeering boys they disapproved of, or the girls themselves. She had a horrible feeling that the women were thinking just the same thing about short skirts and boyish hats that she and Annie had.

She swallowed hard, trying to push down the frightened lump in her throat. Then, in a thread of a voice, she called, “You leave them alone!”

“Phyllis *Dean!*” Annie said admiringly. She stood up on her tiptoes and yelled, “You beast! Kicking a girl – I hope you’re proud of yourself!”

“More of them,” one of the other boys said disgustedly. “Clear off! Stupid Girl Guides!”

And then, shockingly, he picked up a loose stone and threw it at the group of girls milling in the road.

It missed – perhaps he’d meant it to – but it struck the wall just by Annie’s face. Phyl grabbed Annie, huddling her close. This time, her voice wasn’t a thread. “You leave my sister alone!” she screamed. “Or I’ll fetch a constable!”

Phyl hadn’t the first idea where she’d find a policeman, but she must have sounded like she meant it.

“What did you do that for?” the first boy growled to his friend. “Now you’ve torn it. Come on!”

At that, the three of them hared off down the alley, leaving Phyl, Annie and the girls staring at each other in stunned silence.

The littlest of the girls ducked out from under the older one’s arm. She wasn’t wearing a shirt and odd hat like the others, Phyl realised. She had a woollen jumper on instead. And she was definitely younger than Annie, perhaps eight or nine.

“Let go of me, Lucy!” She straightened her floppy knitted hat, then peered down the alley where the three boys had disappeared. “Don’t think a constable’s going to catch them,” she said to Phyl.

Phyl gazed back at her, tongue-tied. What was she supposed to say to these strange girls?

“A constable would probably tell us we should go home to our mothers too.” The older girl, Lucy, sighed. “You’re not hurt, are you?” she asked, looking between Phyl and Annie. “That stone didn’t hit you?”

“No!” Annie bounced forward. “What are the sticks for? Why have you got boys’ hats on? Why are you marching – are you going somewhere?”

“Shh!” Phyl tried to hush her, but Annie wasn’t having any of it.

“Oh, do stop it, Phyl! I want to know. Are the sticks for hitting people with?”

“No!” Lucy shook her head. “But we do know jiu jitsu,” she added and Phyl nodded. She didn’t know what that was exactly, but it was clearly something important.

“You don’t!” the littlest girl burst out. “You fell over when we were practising and broke a milk jug. Mother said you weren’t to do it again.”

Lucy flushed. “Dry up, Elizabeth. We’re *learning* jiu jitsu,” she said thinly. “For self-defence. Our Guide captain used it on a policeman once. She knocked him down.”

“Miss Lynley’s a suffragette,” the littlest girl announced proudly. “She’s been in prison.”

“Oh . . .” Phyl swallowed. These were most definitely not the sort of girls their mother would want her and Annie talking to, however posh their accents. Attacking policemen? Whatever next!

“We’d better be getting back,” she said, snatching Annie’s hand. “I told Mum we’d help in the shop.”

“Let me go!” Annie wailed as Phyl pulled her away from the watching Guides. “I want to talk to them! They didn’t tell us about the sticks!”