

3. *The Vane Rebellion* (October 1909 to January 1910)

During July and August Sir Francis Vane worked prodigiously hard in London creating representative district associations designed to link the numerous local committees. Many Scoutmasters had wanted to go their own way, and the general mood was one of truculent independence. This situation had been brought about partly by J. A. Kyle's high-handed and tactless methods,¹ and partly by a growing suspicion that Headquarters was too closely involved with military organizations. In May the Battersea Boy Scouts seceded from the Baden-Powell Boy Scouts and formed the British Boy Scouts.² Two months later the popular boys' weekly, *Chums*, began to promote the British Boy Scouts as a circulation-boosting device.³ Vane explained to Baden-Powell that it was vital to move fast to prevent further damage, and urged him to 'understand with how much suspicion and dislike the Headquarters is regarded by a very large proportion of active men in your organization.'⁴ This disaffection was not a figment of Vane's imagination and he was right to hold Kyle and Sir Edmond Elles responsible.

Thoroughly sick of Vane's criticisms, Kyle forced a crisis in early November by threatening to resign as Manager unless Baden-Powell dismissed the baronet. When Elles and his deputy de Burgh supported Kyle, Baden-Powell was placed in a very awkward position. Vane was not a paid employee who could be fired with a week's wages, but an aristocratic volunteer who had given a considerable amount of his time to organizing the London Scouts and who might prove very troublesome if asked to resign without any adequate reason being offered. Believing the problem to be as much about personalities as anything else, Baden-Powell warned his Manager that this was a poor reason for dismissal. Kyle simply repeated his threat: 'It must be either Sir Francis Vane or myself.'⁵ Baden-Powell ought to have called Kyle's bluff and refused to be blackmailed; but, being fully occupied with his Territorials, he could not face losing his Manager and standing up to Elles who was urging him to 'abolish' the post of London Commissioner on the wholly inadequate grounds that the 'Western Committee' – formed before Vane's appointment – had not recognized him.⁶

Baden-Powell first succumbed to the mounting pressure on 4 November, when he rebuked Vane for having exceeded his authority by seeking to formulate religious policy for the whole Movement. Vane had made no secret of his negotiations with the Bishop of London about the recently formed Church of England (or Diocesan) Scouts; these church troops threatened to become a movement within a movement with their own Scout Law ('A Scout is a Brother to All Diocesan Scouts.'). 'I really understood,' declared Vane, 'that the

making of peace between the warring factions of Scouts *within my area* was one of the duties of a Commissioner.' He angrily dismissed the Western Committee as 'the worst administered one' in the capital. He pointed out that thanks to him the whole of London was now covered by councils, and advised Baden-Powell to find out what the majority of men working with him in London actually thought.⁷ On 12 November Baden-Powell hinted that he would be grateful for Vane's resignation. But when it was clear that Vane would go only if sacked, he dropped this suggestion. 'You go farther than is wanted,' Baden-Powell wrote lamely, adding, 'A Scoutmaster in Yorkshire told me this week that he and others wished I was still at the head of the Scouts and not Sir F. Vane!' He concluded with the mildest of warnings: 'Unless you can assume your proper place as Commissioner, under the direction of the Chief Commissioner, I must ask you to consider whether you would not take another post . . .' (The one he suggested was Commissioner for Colonial branches.)⁸

Vane next suggested the formation of a London Council representing all the local associations. Sir Edmond Elles was acutely embarrassed when the Bishop of London lent his support to this idea; and although Baden-Powell was impressed by Vane's long and cogently argued report on the subject, Elles unexpectedly authorized Kyle to hand Vane a letter of dismissal.⁹

Sir Francis responded by calling a meeting of London Scoutmasters on 18 November at the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit Office. Baden-Powell attended and was badly shaken by the Scoutmasters' obvious devotion to Vane; he left this meeting feeling sure that Vane's 'so-called crimes were merely over-zeal'. He was very upset that Kyle and Elles had acted without consulting him, but he could hardly sack his Manager and Chief Commissioner. 'Kyle's letter of dismissal was very wanting in tact, and was premature,' he told Elles. 'I have told Vane to carry on for the present pending our final consideration of the question.'¹⁰

But Elles continued to back Kyle and, only two days later, they both repeated their threat to resign unless Baden-Powell acted against Vane. So on 20 November Baden-Powell was obliged to write to Sir Francis, going back on what he had promised just 48 hours earlier. Now he wrote claiming that 'the meeting on Thursday night proved to me what I had supposed viz that you have an entirely wrong conception of your duties as a Commissioner. It is therefore impossible for me any longer to have confidence in you in that capacity.'¹¹

Vane was amazed to find himself dismissed. Why, he asked, had Baden-Powell failed to state his objection at the meeting? 'Instead of this you publicly ordered the cancellation and withdrawal of the letter which the Managing Secretary [Kyle] at Headquarters had written to me . . . and you requested me to carry on the work . . .'¹² Vane

reminded Baden-Powell that he had offered him another post as recently as 4 November.

Under pressure from Vane to make a specific charge against him, Baden-Powell declared, 'The charge, if you like to call it such, is that you did not suit me . . . I could not trust you.'¹³ Totally dissatisfied, Vane pointed out that covert 'insinuations had been made'. 'It is my right to hear what they are,' he told Baden-Powell, 'and it is YOUR DUTY to the cause to see that things are open and above board.' Within days of his dismissal, Vane decided to press on with his own Boy Scouts. 'I have given you every help I could, but the movement is bigger than *the man*, or any man, and God help me I will forward the movement even if the man does wrong.'¹⁴

Vane now organized a protest meeting of almost 200 Scoutmasters from the London area. Baden-Powell responded with a circular instructing local secretaries and Scoutmasters not to attend on pain of dismissal; he noted in the margin of a draft of this circular: 'Sir F. V. has mistaken his instruction and in his zeal has rather become the administrator of the London District. Instead of organizing the Council, which was to do this, he has started an office of his own to do it.'¹⁵

Baden-Powell's confusion is painfully apparent. He had made Vane his London Commissioner, not his Inspector for London. He had indeed asked Sir Francis to organize a London Council, which he had been actively engaged in doing. The opposition to centralized councils had originally come from Stephc himself.¹⁶ It was only the row with Vane which finally persuaded Baden-Powell and dichards like Elles that they needed a Council at all. But instead of an elected body, they envisaged one packed with 'invited' public figures; this body would give a spurious appearance of democracy to the organization without actually changing anything.

This was the issue which dominated the meeting called by Vane at the Caxton Hall on 3 December 1909 – should the Movement have an autocratic hierarchy or be run in a democratic fashion? Many speakers acknowledged their indebtedness to their founder, but still believed that the Scoutmasters ought to decide the shape of their own organization. The meeting also resolved that Vane's dismissal be reconsidered pending the formation of a London Council. Fears were expressed that, if Headquarters could arbitrarily dismiss Scout officials, this could endanger their livelihoods. Although tempers ran high, no vote of confidence in Baden-Powell was proposed.

Sir Edmund Elles sent a friend to the meeting as an observer and was distressed enough by his report to write at once urging Baden-Powell to set up a Council. 'This is the only thing that can save the movement from disaster. I only fear that it is too late. With such an organization all this would have been impossible – now it is you against Vane. Kyle's

great unpopularity too has much to do with it.¹⁷ The press was broadly sympathetic to Vane. **SCOUTS' REVOLT: LIVELY PROTEST AGAINST 'ONE-MAN RULE'** was the *Daily News's* headline.¹⁸ **SPLIT IN THE BOY SCOUT CAMP - VIOLENT ATTACKS ON GENERAL BADEN-POWELL** was how the *Daily Express* summarized the situation.¹⁹

The whole episode was a disaster for Baden-Powell and for the Boy Scouts. He had been lamentably served by Elles, but Stephe alone was responsible for his own indecisive handling of the affair. An eventual inquiry found nothing more damning than the fact that Vane sometimes smelled of whisky.²⁰ Writing to Evelyn Wood, Baden-Powell mentioned 'various points in his character, which stand against him . . . I could explain this to you, should you desire it, in conversation.' This was exactly the kind of innuendo which Vane feared. He later believed that Baden-Powell had spread rumours that he was a homosexual.²¹ By mid-January, under direct threat of proceedings for libel and slander, Baden-Powell felt compelled to put in writing that he had intended 'no reflection on your personal character'. 'As I have explained before, the difference between us was a personal one on a matter of discipline. And, as I have already placed on record, your ability and energy in the discharge of your duty was undeniable.'²²

Vane's real sin was to have defended himself and thus caused public embarrassment. After years of army life, it was Baden-Powell's instinct to back authority - in this case Headquarters - against a man far more in touch with the feelings of the rank and file. So Baden-Powell vacillated, broke a promise and finally backed nonentities against a highly original man who, while eccentric and egotistical, was a genuine 'knight errant' with an unshakable determination to right wrongs regardless of how many toes he trod on. Six years later, while serving as a reserve officer, he would be strongly advised by officials in Dublin Castle to suppress the truth about the murder of four Irish prisoners in order to save the face of the British military establishment. Instead he went to London to confront the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener, in person; then he returned to Ireland to apologize to the widows on behalf of the army.

A month after his dismissal from the Scouts, Vane accepted an invitation to be President of the British Boy Scouts (the breakaway organization which had started with the Battersea Boy Scouts), bringing with him most of the troops in the London area and the majority of those in Birmingham. Some of the most famous Liberals in the country joined his committee: Sir Francis Belsey, W. T. Stead, Charles Masterman M.P., Barrow Cadbury, Sir Herbert Raphael M.P. and, last but not least, J. Howard Whitehouse, the man Baden-Powell had hoped to employ as his Manager but who was now Liberal

M.P. for mid-Lanarkshire. By early April 1910, with the help of *Chums* magazine, the B.B.S. numbered about 50,000 boys and was supported by the National Peace Council, the Boys' Life Brigade, the Sunday School Union and Toynbee Hall.²³ Through *Chums* the B.B.S. was soon spreading to the colonies and this impelled Baden-Powell to take positive steps for the first time to establish control over the Movement in the colonies and dominions.²⁴

In 1911 Sir Francis Vane's financial affairs – which for some years had been problematic because of a disputed inheritance – took a turn for the worse. By subsidizing uniforms and by other acts of generosity to his Scouts, Vane had over-committed himself and was declared bankrupt in August 1912.²⁵ His 'rebel' movement entered a phase of rapid decline. Baden-Powell was very lucky to have escaped in this way.

The most enduring consequence of the Vane rebellion was the alienation of the majority of London's Scoutmasters from Headquarters. When the London Scout Council was eventually formed it frequently ignored Headquarters' directives, raised its own money and in the early 1920s ran a magazine, *The Trail*, which published articles openly critical of Baden-Powell himself. The capital would keep its own Commissioner until 1965, a quarter of a century after Baden-Powell's death, and only then was London divided up among seven individual Commissioners as the founder had wanted.²⁶

The Vane revolt convinced Baden-Powell that if the Boy Scouts were ever to become a democratic organization he would always be in danger of being voted into a position of powerlessness akin to a constitutional monarch's – under the thumb of some man of energy like Sir Francis Vane and his 'cabinet' of elected regional representatives. He was determined that this nightmare should never come to pass. The Movement's supreme body should therefore be an unelected council of men of public standing with insufficient time to attend more than one meeting a year. These 'invited' figures would in turn 'elect' a small executive committee whose prospective members would already have been nominated by Baden-Powell. This Executive Committee, chaired by Baden-Powell or his Chief Commissioner, would appoint the County Commissioners who would in turn appoint the District Commissioners. By decreeing that Commissioners should not be Scoutmasters, Baden-Powell hoped to ensure that their loyalties would only extend upwards to Headquarters rather than downwards to the grass roots. Although district committees would consist of democratically elected members, they could be dissolved by a County Commissioner. Baden-Powell's later claim that the counties and districts were 'autonomous units' was false. 'The function of Headquarters,' he stated in a memorandum, 'is merely to define principles.'²⁷ In practice the 'principles' of the Movement could be

interpreted as covering a very wide range of practical matters which district committees judged to be of purely local concern.²⁸

In March 1911 Baden-Powell met members of Vane's old East London Council and acknowledged that 'they had been frequently snubbed by Headquarters', and matters of direct concern 'done behind their backs' without consultation. He blamed de Burgh and Elles for creating a situation in which it was 'not surprising' that members of the Council had been 'prepared to chuck up the whole thing'.²⁹

The loss of London to Vane and the confusion that had preceded this disaster convinced Baden-Powell that he would have to leave the army and devote himself entirely to the leadership of his Movement. He resigned his post with the Territorials on 31 March 1910. At 53 he was embarking upon a second career which would make him more famous than he had ever been in the years immediately after the Boer War.

4. *Character Factory or Helping Hand?*

In recent years five out of six scholars* who have studied the early Boy Scout Movement have concluded that Baden-Powell's overriding aim was to make efficient future soldiers, and that his interest in good citizenship was secondary and cosmetic. Largely because the British Scout Association has always categorically denied any military tendency, historians have gone to inordinate lengths to 'prove' what a cursory reading of Baden-Powell's handbook makes obvious: namely that Scouting *did* have military aims among others.

Yet I believe that these 'anti-militarist' historians have overstated their case – just as the most thoughtful and wide-ranging of them, John Springhall, predicted might happen: 'Imbalance,' he wrote wisely, 'is the price to be paid for any attempt at re-adjusting historical boundaries.'¹ I myself am convinced that although *Scouting for Boys* resonates with fear for the future of the British Empire, the kindness and generosity advocated as the basis for good behaviour was not simply included – as one scholar has claimed – as an expedient façade to conceal the Movement's true purpose from nonconformist and liberal parents.² Because none of the scholars employed a biographical approach, they were not in a position to observe how Baden-Powell's interest in good character and in the educational possibilities of Scouting began in South Africa as something quite separate from his later involvement with cadet corps and miniature rifle shooting. Through the influence, direct and indirect, of men as different as William Smith, Ernest Thompson Seton, Roger Pocock, Arthur Pearson and R. B. Haldane the two previously distinct strands were finally brought together, as I have shown, in *Scouting for Boys*.

* See note 10 for Chapter Nine, page 627.