



THE
RAMBLER CLUB'S
WINTER CAMP
W. CRISPIN SHEPPARD

The Rambler Club's Winter Camp

BY W. CRISPIN SHEPPARD

Table of Contents

Introduction

The Rambler Club's Winter Camp

CHAPTER I
THE FIRE-BELL

CHAPTER II
THE BUCKET BRIGADE

CHAPTER III
OFF TO THE WOODS

CHAPTER IV
"UNDENIABLE FACT"

CHAPTER V
THE ROAD OF ICE

CHAPTER VI
MAKING CAMP

CHAPTER VII
THE FIRST HUNT

CHAPTER VIII
THE GUARDIANS

CHAPTER IX
A NEW SPORT

CHAPTER X
A SKATING MATCH

CHAPTER XI
A NIGHT ALARM

CHAPTER XII
THE WILDCAT

CHAPTER XIII
ON THE TRAIL

CHAPTER XIV
HUNTER AND TRAPPER

CHAPTER XV
A PRACTICAL JOKE

CHAPTER XVI
YARDSLEY'S TRAPS

CHAPTER XVII
SMOKE SIGNALS

CHAPTER XVIII
WHO TOOK THE FURS?

CHAPTER XIX
LOST IN THE SNOW

CHAPTER XX
WOLVES!

CHAPTER XXI
SUSPICIONS

CHAPTER XXII
THE FAWN

CHAPTER XXIII
BACK TO CAMP

CHAPTER XXIV
A QUARREL

CHAPTER XXV
SELF-DEFENSE

CHAPTER XXVI
SNOWBALLS

CHAPTER XXVII
A CAVE AND A BEAR

CHAPTER XXVIII
THE NOTE ON THE DOOR

CHAPTER XXIX
THE NEAR-BANDITS

CHAPTER XXX
BURYING THE HATCHET

CHAPTER XXXI
YARDSLEY'S LAST JOKE

The Rambler Club's Winter Camp



"WE CAN'T GET THERE TOO SOON!"

Introduction

"The Rambler Club's Winter Camp," though a story complete in itself, deals with the further adventures of the jolly club whose acquaintance we made in "The Rambler Club Afloat."

Although Nat Wingate has not always acted a good part toward Bob Somers and his friends, they are generous enough to forget past differences.

An enforced vacation, due to the burning of the Kingswood high school, gives the five boys an opportunity to accompany Nat and his friend, John Hackett, on a winter camping trip.

Life in the wilds, amidst snow and ice, has its discomforts and dangers, as well as charms, and many trying and exciting experiences fall to their lot; and these they meet with a cheerful, courageous spirit.

But this is not all; a series of happenings puzzle the boys, their wonder and curiosity increasing, as one strange incident follows another, until the mystery is eventually solved.

Their life in camp has done them a world of good; and they return home full of pleasant and lasting remembrances. Some of the further outdoor experiences of the same boys may be found in "The Rambler Club in the Mountains" and "The Rambler Club on Circle T Ranch."

W. CRISPIN SHEPPARD.

The Rambler Club's Winter Camp

CHAPTER I

THE FIRE-BELL

Bob Somers, in his room on the upper floor of Pembroke Hall, was busily engaged in working out an algebraic equation. The cozy little study adjoined his bedroom, and was situated almost underneath a tower which rose above the surrounding trees. On the walls several engravings and photographs were tastefully hung, while close to the desk before which Bob was seated stood a table covered with the various odds and ends which boys are apt to possess.

It was one of those cold, keen winter nights when the comforts of a warm and cozy room seem especially attractive. The weather was clear, but the streets were white with snow, and a slight breeze made the tree-tops sigh and murmur.

Suddenly Bob Somers raised his eyes from the paper before him and listened intently.

The booming of a bell came over the frosty air, now very faint, then rising clearly, as the sound of the breeze sank to a low, droning whisper.

"My gracious!" cried Bob. "The fire-bell!"

For a second time, the ominous notes pealed forth, two coming close together, then, after a brief pause, seven in succession.

"Box twenty-seven! I wonder where it is."

The fire-alarm was seldom heard in the quiet little town of Kingswood, and the sound made his pulse quicken.

He hastily opened a door and made his way to an iron staircase which led to the tower. Up two steps at a time he bounded, until a small square room was reached. It had windows on all sides and commanded an extensive view of the surrounding country.

Bob Somers peered eagerly out at the icy winter scene. The limits of the snow-covered grounds of Pembroke Hall were defined by a row of electric lights on the highway. Beyond, several residences appeared faintly against the sky, but nearly all else was lost in gloom. Myriads of stars shone brilliantly.

A faint, hazy patch, as of smoke illuminated by an electric light, appeared above a dark line of trees.

"That must be the fire," murmured Bob, in some excitement. "Great Cæsar! It's near the schoolhouse."

Dashing down-stairs, he quickly donned his overcoat and hat.

"Fo' goodness' sakes, what am de matter?" inquired Peter Lexington, the colored boy, in astonishment.

"There's a fire, Peter! Can't stop to talk now."

"Fo' de lub of goodness! a fire?"

The surprising intelligence seemed to deprive Peter of all movement, and before he could utter another word, Bob was off.

In a moment, he had passed between the tall gate-posts at the entrance.

The air was sharp and keen. Great banks of snow, heaped up along the sides of the street, shone brightly in the glare of electric lights.

As Bob Somers neared the scene, he learned to his astonishment that the high school was on fire.

Kingswood, a wealthy community, had an excellent fire department. It was equipped with a ladder truck and an automobile fire-engine, the motor of which also operated the pumps.

The high school stood back from the street, surrounded by spacious grounds. In the centre of the three-story stone building rose a cupola of attractive design. About a hundred feet distant, the road was bridged over a large pond.

Bob Somers, breathing hard after his run, mingled with the excited groups in front of the school.

A cloud of whitish smoke partially obscured the building, its heaviest portion being toward the western end.

"It's getting away from them, sure," said a man close by. "If they don't hustle along that steamer from Rockville pretty soon the place is a goner."

Breaks in the curling wreaths of smoke revealed a ladder leaning against the wall and a line of hose entering the window above it. The shouts of the volunteers rose above the

continuous roar of the Kingswood engine and the excited murmur of the crowd.

"That man is right," thought Bob, with a tremor of excitement; "I only wish something more could be done."

From the midst of the crowd, at a point some distance away, rose a peculiar shout, somewhat like the hooting of an owl.

Instantly Bob Somers threw back his head, and made a similar sound. This was a special signal often used by the Ramblers to call each other.

"Hello, Dave Brandon!" cried Bob, lustily.

"Hello yourself!"

In a moment the stout boy hurried forward.

"Isn't it awful, Bob, to see the old school going up like this?" he said.

"How did it start, Chubby?"

"Guess no one knows. Let's find the other fellows. Give a whoop, Bob!"

"Hello, Sam Randall!"

"Hello, Dick!"

"Hi, hi, Tom Clifton!"

In a few minutes, the Ramblers had managed to locate each other.

"Maybe we can save something yet," cried Bob. "Let's go into the grounds."

There was no railing, consequently they had free access, and the frozen crust presently began to crack sharply beneath their feet.

"Professor Hopkins is over there!" exclaimed Bob Somers. "He just came out of the door."

Bob darted between the groups of people, with the others close at his heels.

"Professor Hopkins!" he cried.

The principal, enveloped in a long coat, seemed almost overcome with emotion. He was staggering along under a load of books.

"Somers!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, sir! We're going to try and save something!"

"I am ruined!" gasped Professor Hopkins, apparently not hearing his words. "The fire is steadily gaining—my office is doomed."

"Come on, fellows!" shouted Bob.

The moment he reached the doorway, Professors Hughes and Ivins came out, each carrying an armful of books.

"Don't go in there!" shouted the former, warningly; "you'll be stifled."

"If the Rockville engine was only here, Professor Hopkins' office might be saved," exclaimed Professor Ivins.

"Boys!" cried Dave Brandon; "I've got an idea. We'll form a chain and get water from the pond."

"Splendid, Chubby! You've struck it!" broke in Bob, enthusiastically.

"There are plenty of people around who ought to help us," added Dick Travers; "it must be a double line—one to pass back the empty buckets."

The students turned toward the crowd.

"Who wants to join a bucket brigade?" yelled Dave Brandon.

"I do!" shouted one.

"Count me in," added another.

The crowd, as if ashamed of its former inactivity, became animated with life. Strangely enough, it had not occurred to any one before that some use might be made of the pond.

Dick Travers, Sam Randall and Tom Clifton, accompanied by several others, started off in search of buckets. An axe was procured—then the frozen surface of Deal's pond began to resound to the sturdy blows of the volunteers.

In the meantime Bob Somers and Dave Brandon had entered the building. Choking and sputtering, they reached the main corridor and saw bright tongues of flame mingling with the smoke.

From the floor above came excited shouts and the sound of axes chopping through rafters and beams.

Bob Somers and Dave Brandon did not care to tarry long. Their eyes ached and choking sensations gripped their throats.

"Unless the fellows hurry up, it will be too late," gasped Dave, as the two made their way out and stood upon the steps.

"Let's make a dash for the president's room, and get out some of his things," cried Bob Somers. "Come on, Dave Brandon!"

Both boys again disappeared in the smoke-laden atmosphere.

CHAPTER II

THE BUCKET BRIGADE

It was a rather perilous undertaking. Professors Hughes and Ivins, both elderly men, did not dare to again brave the danger.

"Come back, boys—come back!" called Professor Hughes, distractedly.

But Bob Somers and Dave Brandon were already groping their way toward the president's office, which was situated to the left of the entrance. They knew that it contained some of the most prized possessions of Professor Hopkins. Besides books and scientific instruments there were rare collections of butterflies and other insects.

The Ramblers knew where the cases were kept, and their efforts to reach them proved successful. A few moments more and they were staggering toward the entrance heavily laden.

"Bravo, boys!" cried the professor of mathematics, seizing the precious trays.

"Hurrah for the bucket brigade!" shouted Bob Somers. "Here comes the water."

Two lines of men and boys, reaching from the schoolhouse steps to the pond, were ready and eager for work. In a moment the first bucket had arrived. Bob Somers seized it and rushed inside.

The buckets began to follow each other in rapid succession, and the volunteers, in relays, fought the flames with determined efforts.

Dave Brandon continued to work in the president's office, and as fast as articles were brought out other students carried them to the home of Professor Hughes, almost opposite the school. At length they had the satisfaction of taking over the last tray.

Suddenly the clang of a distant bell came over the air.

"The Rockville engine!" cried Bob.

In a few moments it rumbled over the bridge, leaving a trail of embers, which the breeze caught up and danced merrily along the snow-covered street.

Then the tender, with loudly clanging bell, passed between the crowds which had hastily parted to the right and left.

Bob and his companions felt that their services were no longer needed, so they threw aside their buckets and walked across the street to the engine.

It had taken a position beneath an electric lamp, its polished surfaces glistening brightly. Several firemen were already attaching the suction hose. Another was piling on fuel and the peculiar smell of soft coal smoke mingled with the pungent odor of burning wood from the schoolhouse. A hissing sound showed that the steam had reached a high pressure. It was an interesting moment to the boys.

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