

## *Somebody's Knocking*

*By Elsie Locke*

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The mountain hut was creepy in the dark. Never before had Terry and Paul been in a place like this. In the daytime it was great, and all the better for being rough. By candle light the dark corners were like black holes, and the flicker of the firelight made their faces look odd. There were so many moths on the ceiling that they looked like a wallpaper pattern. The trees in the bush outside had long snaky branches leaning to the windows and there were no curtains to hide them. And there was no lock on the door. In a Wild West film, a place like this would have father's gun set out ready for action: but there was no gun, and father wasn't with them.

"What if somebody comes?" said Terry.

"Nobody will come," said Mum. "We have this valley all to ourselves. There's only one hut, and we're in it."

They played cards and cracked jokes to keep out the loneliness. They were tired out when they snuggled down in their sleeping bags. Nothing looks creepy when your eyes are shut; and soon all three were asleep.

A long time afterwards Terry woke up. He leaned over the top bunk.

"Paul!" he said. "Wake up, Paul. Somebody's knocking."

Paul snapped awake. "Gee, you're right," he said. "Better wake Mum."

He tiptoed across the floor and touched her gently on the shoulder. "Mum," he whispered, "Somebody's knocking."

She sat up and listened. Yes, there was knocking all right.

"I'll get the torch," she said.

Terry was back in his bunk before she opened the door. The beam of the torch went to and fro making ghostly shapes on those snaky trees; but nobody was there.

"It must have been a branch tapping," said Mum as she got back into her bunk. "Settle down and go to sleep."

But as soon as the torch went off, the knocking began again: not a lot of rapid taps as when visitors come to the house, but a steady and firm tap... tap... tap.

"I'm scared," said Terry.

"It's not at the door," said Paul, and his voice was scared too. "It's inside. It's knocking on the walls, and the ceiling, and - oh Mum, please light a candle!"

"All right," she said, quite calmly. She reached out and struck a match and the candle flared just as knock! sounded on the windowpane. Something small and solid flew across the room and went knock! on the side of Terry's bunk. And then again, knock! on the back of the door.

"Sparrows do that when they're shut inside." said Paul. He wasn't talking in scared whispers now; he was all curiosity. "It can't be a bird though. What is it, Mum?"

"You'd better catch it and see," she said.

"Will it hurt us?"

"Nothing lives in the mountains that hurts people. It's harmless, whatever it is."

"I'm going to get it!" said Terry, swinging down from his bunk again.

"No, I am!" cried Paul.

And after that there were two kinds of knocking - the thing going tap! on the walls and the boys going bump! into one another. The thing was always one bump ahead. Soon Mum was in fits of laughter.

"You'll only catch one another that way. Try standing still for a change," she said.

They did, and the thing went knock! right onto the table in front of them. Quick as a wink Terry grabbed a basin and turned it over.

"I've got it! Mum, I've got it! Get up quick!" he yelled. "Bring the candle closer."

"It'll take off when you lift the basin," said Paul.

"We'll try not to frighten it," said Mum.

She held the candle while very slowly Terry lifted the basin. The thing didn't move at all. It lay there in the candle light and let them look.

It was a beetle. A beetle much, much bigger than any they'd ever seen. A beautiful beetle with brown patterns on its back and curling feelers as long as its body.

"That's a huhu!" said Mum. "The sort that makes tunnels in logs, and the grubs are fat and good to eat. I've never seen one as big as this. I think you've caught the biggest huhu of them all."

They looked at it until they could have drawn every detail from memory. Then they opened the door and picked up the huhu beetle in a towel and took it outside.

After that, the bush didn't seem creepy any more. It was only a home for moths and beetles, after all.