

# The Crawling Creature



*Every Step Meant Danger in the Trail of Dan  
Buckly's Mysterious, Sinister Killer*

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**A**YRES swung around tensely. The heavy rifle that he held in his hands was ready as he gazed back. His eyes searched the dense undergrowth that lined the faint trail through the jungle.

The low overhanging branches of the trees made it dark and shadowy despite the hot sun overhead. It was hard to see clearly for any distance. Twenty feet away sections of the brush were merely black splotches just beyond the reach of the sunlight

For the past hour he had been almost certain that he was being followed. He had expected that he would be ever since he had

come back to the camp that he and Dan Buckley had made during the previous night.

Finding Dan that way had been horrible. Dix Ayres did not like to think about it. Yet it was hard to forget his friend lying there just at the edge of the little clearing, his head smashed like an egg shell and those two ghastly red X's drawn across his cheeks with his own blood.

Ayres was sure that it had not been done by the natives. They were not very friendly toward what few white men ventured into this part of the African brush, but still they were comparatively peaceful. No, it had

not been the natives, Ayres was sure of that. It was something far more sinister.

Something which even the blacks themselves feared, and that was the “Crawling Creature.”

The Crawling Creature—no one knew just what it really was, for those few who had seen it had died just as had Dan Buckly, murdered by that one powerful blow that cracked open their heads. It might be human and then again it might be some unusual species of huge ape.

The natives, those few that Ayres had found willing to talk about it at all, seemed to believe that it was some sort of strange beast that had spread a wave of terror over the jungle. Ayres did not believe that the Crawling Creature was an animal, not since he had seen those crimson marks on Buckly’s cheeks.

They had been left there deliberately—the brand of the killer. Even the highest degree of intelligence that an ape might possess would not make him capable of that.

AYRES was convinced that the Crawling Creature was a fiend in human form. Possibly a native, or even a demented white man. The way the money belt that Dan Buckly had been wearing had been torn from his lifeless body indicated that. The five thousand dollars that Dan had been carrying just as Ayres was now, had been missing.

Someone had learned that they were carrying enough cash to buy an interest in that diamond mine in South Africa that their old friend Ed Gordon had written them about. Ayres bitterly regretted that Dan and he had discussed the matter so freely there in that little dive in the coast town near the mouth of the Congo.

News traveled fast at times and two men going alone into the brush and carrying ten thousand dollars in cash between them was tempting bait for the human jackals of that

part of the country.

From the first the two men had felt that they were being trailed. It had been an unusual noise in the brush that had drawn Ayres away from the camp the previous night.

HE never had discovered what had made it, but during his absence the Crawling Creature had found the opportunity to get Dan Buckly—and half of the wealth that the two men possessed.

This morning, after having buried Dan as best he could, Ayres had continued—leading south through the jungle and across the veldt. Hoping to reach Ed Gordon and safety before the thing that lurked in the jungle got him also.

Now he found that someone was following, had been sure of it for the past hour, and he believed that someone or something was the Crawling Creature.

Ayres searched the brush with his eyes, found that he could see nothing, turned and started once more along the trail. He was very much alert. He had grimly made up his mind that whatever or whoever it was that had killed his partner would not get him in the same way.

He halted suddenly, the powerful big game rifle in his hands half raised as he heard a crackling in the undergrowth ahead. A man stepped into view and Dix Ayres stood staring at him in amazement.

The man was a huge creature, fully six feet, seven inches tall and must have weighed close to three hundred pounds. A grimy pith helmet rested on the top of the bushy head of flaming red hair, his clothing was torn and ragged and he held a heavy rifle in one hamlike hand. There was a belt with an automatic in a holster strapped around his waist.

“Looks like I got company,” he said as he stood gazing at Ayres. “This sure is a pleasant surprise.”

Ayres did not speak, but his lean, tall frame was ready for instant action as he stood staring at the other man. The latter appeared big and powerful enough to be that mysterious killer, the Crawling Creature, who crushed men's heads in with one mighty blow. Ayres was not taking any chances.

"What's the idea?" demanded the big man with a grin. "You one of them fellers that figures we ain't be properly introduced? We're both white men, ain't we. There ain't no reason for you being so damn high-hat, Mister."

Ayres realized that the big man was an American just as he was.

"Who are you?" he asked slowly.

"Most people calls me 'Lucky' McNally," answered the big man. "You ain't trusting me for some reason—I can see that, but you're all wrong. I been watching you from the brush up ahead there for the past five minutes. I could have plugged you easy if I'd wanted—but I didn't. Me, I'm a right friendly guy, unless somebody gets me kinda perturbed."

"Lucky McNally, eh?" said Ayres.

HE had heard the name before. McNally bore a reputation in this part of Africa of being a fighting two-fisted adventurer. A trader of sorts who traveled the jungle trails alone bartering with the natives for ivory and anything else they might possess that he deemed of value. Men spoke of Lucky McNally with admiration and respect. It seemed hardly possible that this man could actually be the Crawling Creature and yet Ayres was not sure.

HE thought swiftly and then decided that his attitude toward McNally would be friendly but watchful. He had not forgotten Dan Buckly and he was not taking any chances.

"My name is Ayres, Dixon Ayres," he said slowly. "I have to be careful."

"Why?" demanded McNally, his eyes fixed upon Ayres' lean tanned face. "What's wrong?"

"Something or somebody killed my partner last night," Ayres answered. "Broke his skull with one blow."

"No wonder you're kinda cautious," said the big man. "One blow, eh?" his laugh was booming, friendly. "Sure, I know what you're thinking, Ayres. I look big and husky enough to have done it, but I didn't. Nobody ever said that Lucky McNally minded a good fight, but they ain't saying that I'm a killer either."

"I'm beginning to believe you," said Ayres. "I've heard of you before and you don't look to me like you might be—" he hesitated, deliberately waiting to see if McNally would finish the sentence for him.

"Sure, I know. You don't believe that I'm this Crawling Creature. You're right, Ayres, I ain't. But when I was watching you a few minutes ago, I seen something duck back into the jungle when you turned around, and kinda half crawl away." McNally frowned. "And ever since I been wondering."

"I thought someone was following me," said Ayres.

"There was," said McNally. "And I got a hunch it is this crawling whatever it is."

Ayres nodded. He was still suspicious. If McNally really was the killer, and Ayres was not at all certain that he was not, then he was being very clever now. Saying that he had actually seen something back there along the trail, making it seem that the Crawling Creature was still lurking somewhere in the brush nearby.

"Look!" said McNally suddenly gazing over Ayres shoulder. "There is something moving back there."

Dix Ayres was no fool. He did not swing around with his back to the other man. That would make it far too easy for McNally if he did happen to be the murderer.

Ayres moved forward swiftly, stepped by McNally, well out of the big man's reach, then swung around. He was standing behind McNally and a little to one side of him, the heavy rifle in his hands, ready.

FAR back in the shadows along the trail he saw something moving. Both he and McNally raised their guns to their shoulders at the same instant and the roar of Ayres' Jeffery seemed like the echo of the big man's .57 express rifle.

"Missed," said McNally lowering his weapon. "Too dark back there beneath them trees." He swung around so that he faced Ayres. "You got a lot of sense," he said. "I'll hand you that, for not turning your back on a guy you ain't sure of. If I was in your place I'd a done the same thing."

"I haven't forgotten what happened to my partner last night," said Ayres grimly. "I'll believe that you're not this Crawling Creature when we get it, McNally!"

"Fair enough!" said the big man. "Only tell me one thing. Why was your partner killed?"

Ayres hesitated an instant before he answered. This McNally was a hard-boiled adventurer. If he knew that the man he now talked to was carrying five thousand dollars in a money belt around his waist it might prove a temptation even though he was not actually the Crawling Creature.

"Because my partner was carrying all the money we owned," said Ayres slowly. "Five thousand dollars that we were going to use to buy a share of a diamond mine with."

"Five thousand, eh? In cash?"

"Yes—and it was missing from poor Dan Buckly's money belt when I found him dead."

"Dan Buckly?"

"That was my partner's name."

"Hells Hinges!" exclaimed McNally excitedly. "Was this Buckly a little wiry guy,

sandy hair, with a scar over his right eyebrow?"

"That's Dan all right. Why?"

"Because I know him. Me and Dan used to be friends when he was in Mexico about five years ago." McNally scowled evilly as he gazed at the jungle that surrounded them. "And this Crawling Creature got him! The rotten offspring of a so-and-so! Listen, Ayres, I'm gonna get this 'what-is-it'—if it's the last thing I ever do, Dan Buckly pulled me out of some tough spots—and I'm gunning for his murderer from now on."

"SO am I," said Ayres calmly. "I thought he or it would follow me—might give me a chance to get a shot in where it would do the most good. That's one reason why I started along the trail this morning. The other reason was that I wanted to get back out to the coast and get a boat down to Cape Town where I've got a friend waiting to learn what became of Dan and myself."

"I get you. This friend was figuring on giving you and Dan an in on this diamond mine. Ain't that it?"

"Just about," Ayres nodded.

"Then don't be foolish," said McNally. "You don't want to leave this jungle until you get your five thousand bucks back and we get this Crawling Creature!"

"Yes, I know," said Ayres. "But I would like to know just what this murderer is, whether it is a man or a beast."

A thought struck him and he swiftly told McNally about the two X's that had been drawn on Buckly's cheeks with the murdered man's blood.

"Huh," said the big man as he listened. "Sounds to me like this Crawling whosis is a man—and a crazy one at that. I'm figuring that no guy in his right mind is going to pull a trick like that!"

"That's the way I feel about it," said Ayres.

Now that he knew that McNally had been a friend of Buckly's he was beginning to have a bit more faith in the big man. He did not trust him entirely, for it might be a trick. This claim of friendship upon McNally's part.

The man who had killed Dan had seen his face, would doubtlessly be able to remember it clearly enough to describe it as Lucky McNally had done and Ayres did not remember Buckly having ever mentioned the fact that he had known McNally.

That in itself did not prove very much. For Dan had never been inclined to be overly talkative regarding his life in the years before Ayres had known him.

WHAT McNally said about having known Buckly in Mexico might be true and then again it might not. But the way things stood at present Ayres was willing to give McNally the benefit of the doubt.

"It ain't a native trick either," said McNally as though half thinking aloud. "It might be—" he broke off abruptly and shook his massive head.

"No, if I told you that you'd think I was nutty myself."

"What do you mean?" Ayres looked at McNally curiously.

"Never mind," said the big man starting back along the trail. "Come on. I got a hunch that this killer ain't got any gun. If he had he would have taken a shot at us both long before this," he paused suddenly, and turned to Ayres as a thought struck him. "Say, what did you do with Buckly's gun? He had one, didn't he?"

"OF course," Ayres answered. "I buried it with him."

"That was bright," said the big trail. "I'll bet you'll find that grave dug up when we get back to it!"

"You mean you think this Crawling Creature will want that gun?"

"Sure, he will. Didn't we both just take a shot at him? Well, if he knows we're both after him he's gonna want to be armed and ready for trouble," McNally smiled as he glanced over his shoulder at Ayres as the latter walked close behind him.

"I've seen a lot of tough bozos in my time and the reason I'm still alive and kicking was because I'm always willing to figure they've got as much brains as I have! This Crawling Creature may be crazy but he ain't dumb!"

They went on back through the jungle, following the trail that had evidently been made by the natives, for it was too narrow to have been an elephant spoor.

They had ceased talking and their faces were hard and grim. The set expressions of their countenances brooded ill for the creature, be it man or beast that lurked somewhere amid the brush.

Heat rose in waves from the vegetation all about them. There was no sound save the faint crackling of twigs and leaves beneath their feet. Constantly their gaze searched the shadows, peering into the dark place beneath the trees, ever on the alert for some indication of the presence of the Crawling Creature. But nothing moved.

As they passed beneath the low overhanging branches of a big tree, Ayres, who was walking a few paces behind McNally, brushed against what appeared to be a bit of green vine. It snapped up into the air, then dropped over his head and tightened suddenly, drawing him back and pulling him half off his feet.

He uttered a hoarse cry and McNally wheeled abruptly, the rifle in his hands ready. The big man cursed as he saw Ayres swinging in the air, hanging by a rope made of a vine that was tight about his throat.

McNally fired as he saw a shadowy object make a flying leap from the tree above—land in the brush with a crash, and

then disappear. The big man did not wait to see if his shot had hit its mark. He could tell that Ayres was strangling.

McNally leaped up and caught the vine in his huge fist just above Ayres' head. The combined weight was too much and the vine broke, dropping both men to the ground.

AYRES tore at the noose that was still around his neck as he lay there. It came away—and he gasped for breath.

“That was close,” murmured McNally as he got to his feet. “Too damn close. If you hadn't yelled I might not have known what had happened until it was too late!”

“I know,” said Ayres weakly, rising and picking up his gun. “Did you get him when you fired?”

“Afraid not,” said McNally. “What a jump that was.” There was a scowl on his big face as he gazed up at the tree. “I said it wasn't a native, but I ain't so sure of it now. That vine trick—is one that a black might think of doing. And if it was a white man—he sure knows how to jump.”

THEY both stood listening. Far off to their left they heard a faint rustling in the jungle. It gradually faded into the silence.

“He got away all right,” said McNally. “Guess I missed him.” He smiled ironically. “Reckon you figure I'm a rotten shot—that's the second time I've missed.”

“So did I, once,” remarked Ayres. “Evidently he hasn't dug up that gun yet—if he really is going to do it at all.”

“How far are we from where you and Buckly camped last night now?”

Ayres looked around him. “About a mile, I guess—maybe less.”

“Come on then,” said McNally starting ahead again. “He's got a head start. He'll get there first.”

They went on. Dix Ayres was very careful to avoid anything along the trail. His

neck still ached from that vine rope. He no longer had any suspicions regarding Lucky McNally. The attempt to hang him with the vine had convinced him that the Crawling Creature was actually someone else. There was not the slightest doubt of that.

They reached the clearing in which Ayres and Buckly had camped the previous night without encountering any further trouble. Ayres led the big man to the shallow grave he had dug for Dan Buckly.

“Look!” exclaimed Ayres as they reached it. “You were right!”

The grave had been dug up and the heavy rifle that had been lying beside Buckly's body was missing.

“That guy sure moves fast,” said McNally. “He got here first all right. The gun is gone!”

Ayres was not looking at the grave. His eyes were fixed upon the back of McNally's huge hand. There was a black streak on it that might have been dried blood.

But that was impossible. McNally wasn't the mysterious killer—that was the individual who had been ghoulish enough to rob Buckly's grave. To steal the gun of a dead man.

THERE was one thing about that gun that Ayres had not told McNally—the rifle was not loaded. Ayres had removed the cartridges and put them in his own pockets. He had been intending to tell the big man that, but now he decided against it. He did not have any particular reason for not doing so—save the faint improbable suspicion that had just entered his mind.

He realized that his suspecting the other man was hardly fair. Lucky McNally had rescued him when he had been caught in the jungle by the vine rope in the hands of someone who obviously intended to hang him. If McNally was the real killer he certainly would not have done that. At least it did not

seem very probable to Ayres.

"Looks kind of bad," said McNally gazing around him anxiously. "If this Crawling Creature has the gun—and we know he has, then we're in a tough spot, Ayres."

"We are," said Ayres watching the other man closely. "What are we going to do about it?"

"Try and get him first," said the big man. "Listen, I got a hunch that this guy's somewhere around here. Suppose we separate and see if we can't dig him out, huh?"

"All right," said Ayres. "That might be a good idea."

"It's a swell one," said McNally. "You go that way," he pointed into the jungle toward the south. "And I'll go this," he nodded toward the west. "Circle back here and meet me in about an hour—we ought to have some trace of this killer by then."

Ayres stood watching as the big man moved across the clearing and entered the brush. He stood with his eyes fixed upon McNally's back until the latter disappeared.

Then suddenly Ayres turned and started running toward a big tree. He ducked behind it swiftly, and remained hidden from view. His move was instinctive—and he did not quite know why he had done it, but he felt there was some reason.

McNally's having brought him all the way back to this camping spot did not seem as logical as it had at first. Yet it had seemed sensible—this effort to keep Buckley's gun from the Crawling Creature. Was it though? Ayres wasn't so sure of that now.

He realized that it was not, knowing as he did that the gun was empty. But he had not told Lucky McNally that. Lucky McNally—dimly Ayres tried to remember something that he had heard about the name.

THERE had been some ironical reason for McNally having been given the nickname. He had heard men who knew McNally well laugh

over it, but he could not quite remember what it had been.

Ayres turned and started into the jungle. He might as well do as McNally had suggested and look for the man who had murdered his partner. He did not think the search would prove particularly fruitful.

If the Crawling Creature was clever enough to escape as easily as he had done from that tree back along the trail he was not likely to be found readily if he chose to hide.

For over half an hour Ayres circled through the jungle searching for some trace of the hidden killer. Once he heard a rustling amid the brush, but discovered that it was merely some sort of a small wild animal. He was not interested in game at the moment. He had more important things on his mind.

FINALLY he returned to the clearing. McNally had not as yet returned. Ayres went to Buckley's grave. He stood frowning as he gazed at it. It had been filled in again—and upon the soft dirt that covered it had been drawn two large X's. The mark of the Crawling Creature.

Ayres swung around as he heard the roar of a heavy rifle and a bullet thudded into a tree trunk just above his head. There was a crashing back in the brush and then a second report of a gun. This time the bullet did not appear to be aimed in Ayres' direction. It would not have hit him anyway, for an instant after the first shot had struck he had ducked behind the tree.

In a moment Lucky McNally came running out of the jungle. Ayres had him covered from behind the tree. He was taking no chances with anyone. Either McNally or the other man had fired those two shots, nearly got him with the first one—and as far as Ayres knew the hidden killer's gun was not loaded.

"Ayres!" called McNally. "Where are you?"

"Right here," said Ayres from behind

the tree. "And I've got you covered, McNally!"

"Covered!" exclaimed the big man as he came closer. "What in hell for?"

"Just playing safe," said Ayres. "You better stay right where you are!"

"Of all the fool idiots," exclaimed McNally, "you're it. Here this Crawling Creature takes a shot at you. I fire back at him—and instead of being thankful, like you should be that I'm protecting you, you cover me with your gun. Are you nuts or something, Ayres?"

"Buckly's gun wasn't loaded," said Ayres. "I forgot to tell you that."

McNally stared at him for a moment and then threw back his big head and laughed loudly.

"What of it?" he demanded finally. "Didn't Buckley have a lot of cartridges in his pocket—like we all carry them at times. I got a hunch he did!"

Ayres began to feel rather foolish. The big man was right. Buckley ought to have had a handful of cartridges in his coat pocket. Ayres remembered that was possible.

"You sure are dumb," said McNally with a shake of his head. "Do you think this Crawling Creature would go to all the trouble of digging up a grave in order to get a gun and then not make sure it was loaded? You know damn well he wouldn't."

"I guess you're right," said Ayres as he stepped out from behind the tree, the rifle lowered. "My error, McNally."

"Forget it," said the big man. "I think I winged the killer but I ain't sure."

McNALLY glanced around, and then stood staring as he saw the filled grave.

"What the—" he exclaimed striding closer. "Who done this?"

"The Crawling Creature," said Ayres. "At least those X's seem to be his mark. The man is insane, there's no doubt about it."

"Oh, no he isn't," said McNally. "He's just smart, that's all. He knows those marks are gonna worry us—and he is right."

"I don't agree with you," stated Ayres. "Tricks like that are merely childish—that's all—the products of a demented mind. I tell you the man is a homicidal maniac!"

"That's what you think," McNally glared at him. "But I got a hunch you're all wrong."

"All right," said Ayres. "We won't argue about it."

It was growing late in the afternoon. Ayres dreaded another night in the jungle. It had been dark when the Crawling Creature had murdered Buckley and when the sun disappeared he might strike again.

"I'm going to take one more look around," said McNally suddenly. "You stay here."

Ayres glanced at the big man as the latter spoke. McNally was scowling and he seemed to have something on his mind. He walked away hurriedly and disappeared into the jungle.

Ayres seated himself at the base of a big tree. He could watch all sides of the clearing save in back of him from where he sat. He had not been there long when he began to have the uncanny sensation that someone was watching him. He looked around anxiously, peering into the undergrowth that surrounded the clearing, but he could see no one.

The fact proved nothing. He still felt that someone was gazing at him. He was sure that the hidden watcher expected him to do something, was observing him for that reason. But what was expected of him?

Ayres suddenly remembered something that he had been trying to recall for the past half hour. As he did so a number of things that had puzzled him began to grow clearer in his mind.

THE solution to the mystery of the Crawling Creature was beginning to take shape in his brain. It seemed impossibly fantastic—and yet the more he thought about it the more logical it seemed.

He got to his feet slowly, looked about him as though he half feared that he might be watched. He knew that he was actually being observed closely, but he was playing a part now.

Again he glanced around. He appeared to be satisfied that he was quite alone in the clearing. He went to the tree where he had just been sitting, leaned over as if he were about to pick up something.

“Don’t, you fool!” whispered a voice from the shadows of the jungle nearby. “That’s what he’s waiting for—to find out where you’ve hidden it.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Ayres calmly.

He stood up quickly. Shook his head as though puzzled about something, and then moved to another tree and leaned down as he had done before. Again he did not appear satisfied. He went to a third tree.

Then suddenly swung around, the heavy rifle in his hands half raised. He looked all about him anxiously, then shook his head and seated himself again against the trunk of a tree, the rifle across his knees.

FIFTEEN minutes later he was still sitting there as Lucky McNally appeared out of the brush. Ayres was idly tossing small objects into the brush at his left. As he finished doing so he heard a very faint rustling coming from that direction and smiled faintly.

“Not a trace of that guy,” said McNally as he reached Ayres. “I’m still figuring that he’s somewhere around here though.”

“Got one of those hunches of yours about it?” asked Ayres casually.

“Yes,” the big man nodded. “And I’ve

never gone wrong on one of my hunches yet,” he looked at Ayres. “Know what I think?”

“No,” Ayres shook his head. “What?”

“That this Crawling Creature is watching us for some reason.”

“So do I,” said Ayres.

“Huh?” McNally looked at him in surprise. “Why do you think so?”

“The same reason you do. At least I believe it is. Might be more sure if I knew your reason exactly.”

“I ain’t telling you that yet,” said McNally. He yawned and dropped down on the ground a short distance from Ayres. “Want to see if you can figure it out yourself.”

“I see you carry an automatic,” said Ayres casually. “What is it, a .45 caliber?”

“Yes,” McNally nodded.

“Wonder how the killer ever got the name of the Crawling Creature?” remarked Ayres. “It sounds weird.”

“Well, I’ve heard the natives talk about him,” said McNally. “And they say he kinda creeps up on his man, and busts his head in.”

“That’s what he did to poor Buckley all right,” said Ayres bitterly. “I wish we could get him. I owe that to Dan.”

SO did I,” remarked McNally. “I told you that before. Told you I was good friends with Buckley down in Mexico ten years ago.”

“Yes, I know,” Ayres nodded. “Only you said five years ago the last time. Not that it matters.”

“Naw, I forgets dates easily,” McNally glanced about him. “It’s getting dark.” A thought struck him. “Say, didn’t you and Buckley have any camping stuff?”

“Of course,” said Ayres. “I hid it in the brush when I broke camp this morning. Didn’t want to be bothered with it. I was after the Crawling Creature and I wanted to travel light.”

“That’s a good one!” McNally laughed. “When I first seen you you was

beating it away from this part of the jungle like all hell was after you.”

“I told you that was because I hoped the killer might follow me.”

“Sure you did, but I’ve got a hunch you were wrong—that you were lying!” McNally’s tone changed suddenly. “I’ve been playing with you long enough, Ayres. Where is it?”

“Where’s what?” asked Ayres apparently unconsciously turning so that the muzzle of the rifle across his knees covered the big man. “I don’t understand?”

“Oh, yes you do,” the big man’s voice was heard. “I mean the other five thousand bucks. You hid it somewhere. I want to know where!”

“So that’s it!” exclaimed Ayres.

McNally moved with lightning speed. He flung himself at the other man.

A heavy hand clasped Ayres by the throat and dragged him to his feet, held him. With his left hand McNally reached for the automatic in the holster at his belt.

“Tell me where you hid that money,” he growled. “Or I’ll give you the same thing I gave Buckley!”

Dix Ayres saw death staring at him from those glittering eyes in the big distorted face that gazed into his. He knew that any moment the automatic might crash down upon his head, cracking his skull.

“I’ll tell you,” he gasped. “It’s—”

FROM the jungle behind McNally there came the roar of a rifle. A bullet plowed into the big man’s shoulder, spun him half around. He released Ayres, and turned swiftly, the automatic in his hand. As the automatic barked rapidly Ayres dropped to the ground.

McNally howled with pain as a second bullet from the rifle of the marksman in the brush seared his cheek. The automatic was still barking as the big man turned and dashed madly across the clearing.

Again the rifle boomed. McNally threw his hands above his head, stumbled, and then rolled over to remain there limp and motionless.

“Looks like we got him,” said a voice, and a tall well built man walked into the clearing, a heavy rifle in his hand. “That’s the Crawling Creature! Otherwise known as Bull Dill, the craziest killer that was ever let loose.”

I KNOW,” said Ayres. “And you’re Lucky McNally.”

“Right,” the real McNally looked at him in surprise. “But how did you figure that out.”

“I had heard about you,” said Ayres. “Finally remembered that they had called you Lucky because you hated hunches. This killer here said that he was McNally, but he was talking of having hunches about something.”

“You’re right so far,” McNally grinned. “What else?”

“I had heard that one of the strange things about Lucky McNally was that he never cursed. This Dill here cussed plenty. Then I got to figuring things out. I knew that Dill had brought me back here for some reason. Then I remembered that when I first met him I told him that the Crawling Creature had gotten all the money that Dan Buckley and I had. He knew that I was lying—for he had learned somewhere that Dan and I had ten thousand between us—”

“Yes, I knew that,” said McNally. “Early last night this Dill found my camp. Planned to kill me just as he did your partner, but I got away. I had to move fast though to do it and I had to leave my gun behind. I followed him, saw him murder Buckley—but I was unarmed and helpless—so I could do nothing then.”

“But why didn’t you warn me later?” demanded Ayres.

“I couldn’t last night. After Dill left

here he picked up my trail again. I spent the rest of the night ducking him. In the morning I did follow you,” McNally smiled grimly. “Both you and Dill took a shot at me back there on the trail. That was close.

“Later I climbed up in that tree. I planned to slip that noose over Bull Dill’s head, but it was dark—I couldn’t see very well and I got you instead,” McNally looked at Ayres earnestly. “I’m sorry, old man. Right then was when I certainly played into Dill’s hands. He had you convinced that I was really the Crawling Creature, I’m sure.”

“But you haven’t any hunches about it,” Ayres smiled. “I finally figured it out. That was why I pretended to be looking for the place that I had hidden the money belt. I knew that Dill was watching me. I wasn’t surprised when you warned me from the brush. I thought you might be somewhere nearby.

Sorry you had so much trouble digging up the grave to get Buckly’s rifle—and then found it wasn’t loaded.”

“Yes, that wasn’t so good. You showed a lot of sense when you tossed me those bullets as you were sitting there by the tree. If you hadn’t Dill might have got you.”

“I know that. Dill tried to bluff me into believing that you had done the shooting after he went into the jungle and took a shot at me—but I knew Buckly’s gun wasn’t loaded—and I was almost positive that poor Dan didn’t have any cartridges in his pockets but I wasn’t quite sure. When I saw that the grave had been refilled I knew that whoever the Crawling Creature was he was absolutely insane.”

“You were right,” said McNally, smiling. “And I haven’t got a hunch about it!”