

EERIE STORIES

*Startling Adventures
in Chilling Horror*

AUGUST, 1937

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Middle-aged Graham Munster had patiently watched his beautiful ward grow old enough for him to force her to be his bride. And to keep her from the arms of another and younger man, Munster had to do a

Rehearsal With Doom

By Terrence Flint



THERE was an odd similarity between Graham Munster, retired broker, and his wolf-dog, Karl. Both had yellow eyes that showed red where the underlids turned out. Both had deep clefts at

the sides of their jaws, and both had inborn savagery.

The difference was that the man concealed his true nature behind smiles and a civilized veneer, while the dog was its own, instinctive self.

Fear was the only controlling force it had learned to recognize, and the man, knowing this, used the brutal sway of fear to gain complete mastery over the dog.

Graham Munster stood looking down at Karl now, his eyes narrowed and speculative. The animal was squatted on its haunches, its tongue hanging out, its tusches showing as it watched its master. Then it whined and thrust its damp nose through the wire enclosure encircling its kennel and made necessary by its ferocity.

The dog seemed to be trying to say something, and Munster guessed what it was. He knew that his own actions of late had puzzled the animal. He smiled, and his yellow eyes gleamed in a half cunning, half cruel look.

"You've never wanted anything the way I want her, Karl," he muttered. "She's lovely—and she's mine, just as you are mine. I've raised her, trained her—and *he's* not going to have her!"

A terrible harshness came into Munster's voice as he pronounced the last sentence. His expression was avid as he glanced back toward the house on the crest behind him—the house where Alma MacKnight, his ward, came to stay every summer.

He paused, dwelling upon the envisioned femininity of a slim school-girl budding into early womanhood. That was when he had first evolved the passion that held everything for him in his savage life of primitive emotion. Now his blood raced hot at thought of the slender, girlish figure that was always in his mind. At the same time anger flamed fiercely because another and younger man threatened to take her away.

He seemed to see her face in each window; seemed to see her on the front steps, on the porch, on the lawn; in sports dresses, jersey suits, and filmy afternoon frocks, as he had seen her a thousand times. He saw her slimness, her maturing womanhood that was like the slow, sweet

unfolding of a flower. He remembered the first time he had seen early womanhood in the swelling of her bosom beneath a bathing suit—and he trembled with savage passion.

Then, in his mind's eye, he saw that other hateful figure that had intruded itself upon him, upsetting his plans, making him conscious of his age—Malcolm Paine.

He saw the eager face of Malcolm Paine bending over Alma's shoulder. He saw the quick smiles, the soft brightness that sprang into her eyes.

He remembered that day when Malcolm and Alma had come in, hand and hand, to announce their engagement and to receive his blessing. And he pictured Malcolm's week-end visits ever since, the visits that had become such a habit that the young man regarded Munster's house almost as a home.

And, at the thought of these things, the terrible force of Graham Munster's suppressed emotions seemed to rise in his throat and choke him, like the clutch of vicelike fingers.

They did not know, those young people, how he felt. He was too crafty for that, too suppressed.

If he had told Alma that he wanted her himself she would merely think he was joking. "Certainly, uncle"—she always called him that—"I'll marry both of you. A girl needs two husbands these days to keep her in clothes."

She would have made some such facetious remark, then perched provocatively on the the arm of his chair and patted his cheek. Or even have kissed him, not knowing that the touch of her fresh young lips made a scorching flame spring up inside him.

He was trembling as he looked at the dog.

"You'll help me, Karl," he said. "You don't know it, you ugly beast; but I'll make you. You'd do it now if I said the word."

Then Munster thought again of the touch of Alma's fresh, soft young

lips, pressing in adolescent unawareness. The very memory sent a thrill through the stocky frame of the middle-aged, mentally-warped man. Yes, he must keep her for himself. No young fool was going to take her away. He would teach her to give herself to him, teach her to press that warm, sweet mouth of hers against his with the burning pulse and feeling of fully awakened love.

HE turned toward the tool shed standing near the kennel. He unlocked it, stepped in, reached up on a shelf and took down a long pole with two prongs at its end. He hooked the prongs into a square of cloth cut from a man's shirt. Then, keeping on the leeward side, he went back toward the dog's enclosure.

Karl got up this time and growled, standing stiff-legged. He seemed to know what was about to take place.

Without a word the man thrust the pole through the fence. The dog backed away, but the pole followed him, and the prongs jabbed him once. Karl snarled then. His fangs gleamed as he whirled.

With terrible ferocity he snapped at the pole. The piece of cloth came away in his mouth, and he worried it, chewed it, till the pole caught it up again.

He hardly looked at the man outside the enclosure—the man who was the real cause of his torment. He vented his rage on the pole and the square of cloth on it. His brute mind grasped only the nearer problem, the pain of those prongs and the miasma on that piece of cloth. He did not know that Munster, his master, had secretly cut it from one of Malcolm Paine's old shirts.

For a week now the sinister training had gone on. Each day, whenever Alma was in the village as she was now, Karl got two or three jabs with the pronged pole and had the scent of young Paine waved under his nose.

He sank his fangs into the cloth, and a growing desire was being built up in him to bury those same fangs in the man whose scent he had learned to hate. When the training period was over, Munster walked back to the tool shed exulting.

"He'll tear Paine's throat out," he muttered. "He'll finish him the way he did those two prize Airedales down in the village before they made me lock him up."

He remembered that brief, bitter dog fight down in the street two years before. He remembered the screams of the woman who owned the Airedales, and the sight of their two gasping brown bodies.

It had given Munster a strange thrill to see his dog slay those others. When they had asked him to shoot Karl as a public menace he had refused point-blank. He had paid for the Airedales and had built Karl a wire runway.

And now he planned to put the dog's ferocity to use in a terrible way.

"They'll never know," he thought. "I'll say it was an accident, that Karl got out. I'll shoot him afterwards."

The scheme seemed certain of success. For weeks he had revolved it in his mind. Then he had acted upon it with the thoroughness that characterized his nature; the thoroughness that had enabled him to retire from business at fifty-five with a snug fortune.

Munster walked back toward the house, a stocky figure of a man, dressed in loose-fitting tweeds. He was still muttering to himself, a habit he had developed since the strong emotions of his lost youth had come to life again and been violently repressed.

Alma was spending the night in the village, to stay with a sick friend. She was always doing things like that, helping some one. People liked her as much as they disliked and feared her strangely aloof guardian. He had heard Alma defend him, then laughingly turn to him. "They just don't

understand you, uncle—the way I do.”

Munster smiled. What would Alma say if she knew the thoughts that were going through his mind? She would shun him, never speak to him again, never come to stay with him.

But she did not know, and the thing would soon be settled now. The death of Malcolm Paine would shock her, cast a shadow over her young life. But she would get over it in time. And with Malcolm out of the way she would turn to him at first for sympathy, then for deeper and more intimate things.

He was being ever so cautious about it, ever so adroit. But, with a little luck, the removal of his rival might even take place tomorrow night, the time that Malcolm Paine was scheduled to arrive.

Then, as he was entering the house, Munster saw the letter lying on the hall table! The mail had come while he was away. Madge, their deaf servant, who was like a faithful automaton, had brought it. The letter was for Alma with Malcolm Paine's well-known handwriting in the corner.

The gleam of almost insane hatred returned to Munster's eyes. He snatched up the oblong of paper, and held it in tense fingers as though he were going to tear it to pieces. Then his grip relaxed. The expression of hate was replaced by craft.

What was Malcolm writing to Alma about when he was going to see her the very next day? Was he perhaps postponing his week-end visit for once, or was it just a silly, sentimental repetition of his love?

Graham Munster's palms grew sweaty, and a little pulse throbbed maddeningly in his temples as he thought of the slim, lithe, straight-bodied girl whom he had watched blossom from adolescence into the first stages of asserting womanhood. He had watched and waited, patiently biding his time until he could take her as his mate. Savagely he cursed Malcolm. . . .

MUNSTER went into the bathroom with the letter in his hand. He closed the door and turned the hot water on. He held the letter close to the rising steam, carefully softening the glue. Then he opened it with shaking fingers.

It wasn't the first time he had spied on their correspondence. He kept watch over it jealously, getting a perverted thrill from their private endearments, and fanning his hatred of Paine at the same time. He read the lines eagerly now.

Dearest One: I have splendid news. This is going to be the longest week-end we've had together—two whole days! Think of that!

Old Man Thomas is letting me off tomorrow, instead of Saturday, and I'll see you shortly after you get this letter, a whole day sooner than you expected.

I've got a surprise for you, too—something you would never guess. But, if you like it, one of your own dear kisses will be payment enough.

Hastily and lovingly, your MAL.

Munster's hands trembled more than ever. Young Paine was coming tonight! Why, that meant he would be here in an hour, on the evening train.

And Alma was away! She hadn't expected him; she had gone. There'd be no chance of her meeting him on the path through the woods that he always took. He would come up it alone with his battered, tan suitcase and his coat over his arm, his face eager for a sight of her.

But instead, he'd meet a leaping gray shape, a furry avalanche of destruction that would snuff out his life there in the woods.

It would all be over, and even the dog out of the way before Alma returned. Graham Munster couldn't have wished it better. Fate had played into his hands.

He could hear Madge clattering over her dishes in the kitchen, opening and shutting the oven door. He paced the room, his face an expressionless mask, but his emotions seething.

He ate his dinner abstractedly, hardly knowing or caring what he put into his mouth. He went over again and again in his mind what he would say to Alma, just how he would act, and how he would censor his every word and gesture. There must not be the faintest trace of suspicion in her mind. There would not be. He would see to it.

Then, just as dusk was falling, he heard the train. A thin mist was drifting over the woods now, floating past the windows. He could hear the faint whistle of the engine as it slowed down for the stop at the village.

He knew just how long it would take young Paine to get off, to pass through the village, then strike out on the path through the woods and up the hill.

Without visible hurry, but timing himself precisely, Munster went into the kitchen and had Madge give him a plate of bones. There was nothing unusual in this. He did it almost every night after dinner. He saw the servant with her yellowed, unintelligent face, turn back to her dishes stolidly, suspecting nothing.

Then, with the plate in his hand, he left the house and went toward Karl's kennel.

But, instead of giving the bones to Karl, Munster carried them to the tool shed and put them on the shelf. He took down the pole again, gave the dog one sharp prod, and let him sniff the scent on the cloth.

Then he went around and unlatched the door of the enclosure. The dog had often tried to do this himself and once had nearly succeeded. Every one would think that his getting out was an accident.

Munster glanced back at the house. A clump of shrubbery screened the bottom of it. The kitchen had no windows on the side facing the kennel. He knew he was safe. He spoke softly to Karl then.

"The door's open, Karl. He's coming up the path through the woods. Go get him!"

Instantly the wolf-dog was alert. Stiff-legged he came toward the door. He whined once, nosed it open and stood looking at his master. Munster knew he was safe from the dog, too. Karl wouldn't attack him. He was a one-man animal, and Munster had mastered him completely.

"Go and get him!" he commanded.

With his nose pointing toward the woods, the dog set off at a fast lope. It was the lope of a killer wolf. The animal's hackles were on end now and his black jowls were quivering.

Munster walked back toward the house and saw the dog enter the path through the trees, saw him move along it with terrible certainty.

WITH a paper in his hand, Munster tried to sit down and read. But he couldn't quite do that. He was only human after all, though his brain seemed like the calculating one of a devil. He lit a cigar and walked the floor, listening to the clock on the mantel tick off the minutes.

Five had gone now. Karl must have reached the edge of the woods. He might leave the path and go in among the underbrush to creep up on Malcolm Paine's flank, or he might go straight ahead and attack Paine with a rush from the front.

Eight minutes! The dog might even now have sighted his quarry. He might be crouching to the ground, edging forward, fangs bared, body tensed for the spring.

A light sweat dampened Munster's forehead. His hands trembled. He seemed drawn to the window, though, with the mist and the darkness, he knew he could see nothing. Then suddenly he jerked around.

The telephone in the hall was ringing. It sounded twice and Madge didn't answer. She hardly ever heard it any more. He would have to get rid of her, Munster mused irritably, and get a new one who could hear—after he and Alma were married.

He strode into the hall, took the receiver down mechanically.

"Hello! Who is it? Who's calling?"

His tongue and lips moved, but his thoughts were out there in the woods, dwelling on the scene his mind conjured up.

"I want to speak to Alma a minute."

The voice came to him over the wire. It was a woman's voice. Munster recognized it with a start. Mrs. Hartzon, in the village. He spoke tensely.

"Alma — why isn't she there? I thought she'd gone to spend the night with you."

"She did; but I felt so much better, I told her I didn't need her. She left a few minutes ago. I thought perhaps she'd gotten back and I just wanted to tell her that she forgot her handbag. It's here. You'll tell her, won't you?"

"Yes," murmured Munster. He hardly knew his own voice. He hung up the receiver in a daze, and stood by the telephone for a few seconds like a man paralyzed.

Then gradually, as if the mist outside were miraculously lifting, letting him see in actuality the thing that his mind was building up, he glimpsed the whole scene.

Alma had left Mrs. Hartzon's a few minutes ago, possibly fifteen. She had entered the woods as Karl was coming in from the other side. She was probably with young Paine, had met him as he came up the street from the station.

Laughing and talking, they would not see Karl, or think of him. They would probably stop in the woods to embrace. Her young form would be against his, her lips touching his, her arms encircling him. Their two scents would be almost indistinguishable to the dog's nose. He would attack, and she would stay, trying to defend Malcolm. Then the dog would turn on her, too.

The awfulness of the picture made the blood drain from Munster's face. It seemed as though some all-powerful higher justice had arranged this

miscarriage of his plans, making his own scheme rebound upon him like a terrible boomerang.

Crazed remorse and frustration seized Munster as he thought of the tender young body of Alma being torn and marred by the sharp fangs of Karl. The slim girl-woman that was Alma—she was his life, what he had waited so patiently for. The thought of losing all for which he had dreamed made him tremble.

He did not want to hurt Alma, his ward, the girl he desired so fiercely. With an inarticulate cry in his throat he sprang forward. There might still be time to save the girl.

He stumbled across the room, hands outstretched, groping almost like a blind man. He was shaking with dread and it seemed suddenly that the coldness of the mist had crept into the house and surrounded him.

His stick! He must get that and go out. He flung the door of the hall closet open, seized his stick and an overcoat and a flashlight from the shelf. Then, like a drunken man, he staggered to the door.

The chill mist beat against his face. His skin was clammy with the sweat of apprehension, and he was shivering. Around the house he ran, across the lawn, till he found the path into the woods.

"Karl! Karl!" he cried. "Come here, Karl!"

His voice was almost a shriek. His ears were straining for the growling and worrying of the dog. The animal would be about his awful work in the woods.

THE blacker shadows of the trees seemed to reach for Munster as he approached them. He could feel the increasing coldness as he entered the forest. His feet pounded like drums. His blood roared in his ears. He shouted again:

"Karl! Karl!"

Then his finger pressed the button of the flashlight, sent the bright beam along the path. And his eyes

followed, hardly daring to look for the thing they sought.

He saw the dog then. Two greenish sparks showed ahead in the darkness. A low, ominous growl reached his ears. "Karl! Karl! Come here!"

It was an order now, the voice of command that never failed to bring the dog skulking and cringing up to him. But Karl growled again; the growl of a wolf who knows no master. Munster stopped and turned his flashlight full on the animal. He could see Karl's slinking, gray shape; see the great head close to the ground and the bristling hackles. But Munster still spoke confidently.

"Come here, Karl—come where I can get a look at you."

It was at the dog's jaws that the man was staring, fearful of what he might see; for the woods were strangely quiet. Only the drip of the leaves—the *drip, drip, drip*—and the dog's growl, and his own shaking voice.

Then Karl came closer. But he was still growling—not acting right. It occurred to Munster then that the dog had tasted human blood, that he was unruly. But he had not lost faith in his mastery over the animal.

He raised his stick and shouted again, fiercely, peremptorily.

"Come here, Karl—or I'll brain you."

The dog came then, came like a leaping gray shadow, teeth bared, eyes gleaming.

Munster gave a hoarse bellow of rage and fear.

"You fool! What's the matter? Don't you know me, Karl? It's Graham — your master. Down — get down!"

He leaped aside as the dog made its first rush. But Karl wheeled like lightning and came back snapping wickedly. The animal seemed to have gone mad.

Munster's flashlight struck a bush and fell. He was in darkness now, but he could still see the light of those two wolfish eyes. He screamed then,

and swung blindly with his heavy stick. But something struck him on the chest and he fell.

He felt himself going down under the weight of heavy paws. He shrieked again. The green eyes were coming closer. They were like moons now, moons of devilish fire.

The snarling of the dog drowned the wild beating of his own heart that ached inside his chest, that seemed to be bursting.

Hot breath fanned his face. Munster tried to scream again, but the pressure in his chest paralyzed speech. Then, just before a wave of blackness smote him down, he knew that this was the end. He could feel that hot breath coming closer, those terrible teeth reaching for him, and he went limp.

There came only the drip, drip, drip of the wet leaves and the worrying of the wolf dog as it tore and ripped at cloth.

After a while even that ceased. The animal slunk away. And there was nothing but the slow dripping of the leaves left.

IT wasn't till a half hour later that another sound filled the air, the metallic grinding of a motor car coming uphill in second gear. Two headlights showed on the road that wound serpent-like around the hill toward Graham Munster's house. The car finally stopped before the steps. There were two people in it. One reached forward and sounded the horn; then both were still for a moment, listening.

"I wonder why he doesn't come out?" It was a girl's voice—the voice of Alma MacKnight.

"He doesn't know who it is," said the man beside her, young Malcolm Paine. "He didn't expect either of us—and certainly not this way."

The girl sprang out lightly, her face flushed and eager.

"Uncle! Uncle!" she called as she ran up the steps. "See what Malcolm has—he's bought a car for us both."

She was bursting with excitement. Malcolm had met her on the village street and already taken her for a ride. They would make a trip in the car together on their honeymoon.

But the house was empty, silent. They went into the kitchen where Madge was still working, tidying up.

"I thought he was in the library," she said, reading the question on their lips. "He came back after he fed Karl. I didn't see him go out."

Karl! A look of fear crossed the girl's face.

"You don't suppose he's had trouble with him?" she said, turning toward young Paine. They went out together and found that the dog was gone.

Malcolm ran to his room then, his face grim. He got the shotgun that he used for clay pigeons and slipped two shells into the breech of it. With Alma holding the lantern and walking at his side, he went out again.

He had brought the gun mainly for the girl's protection. Karl seemed to him like a killer. They circled the house and walked toward the woods.

It was there, at the edge of them, that Malcolm Paine saw the gray, skulking shape—a shape that turned and bounded toward them snarling fiercely. He saw the green eyes, the bared fangs; and there was no question in his mind as to what he had to do. It might be Karl's life or Alma's. So, shaking a little, he raised the gun and fired.

The gray shape dropped, twitched a few times and lay still. Malcolm's voice shook, too, as he spoke.

"Don't look," he said huskily. "I know your uncle was fond of him—but it had to be, Alma. He's been getting dangerous. I'm afraid about your uncle now."

They went down the woods path with the lantern, the girl clutching his arm. Then young Paine drew in his breath and Alma began to tremble.

Graham Munster was lying there beside the path—dead.

Young Paine stooped, trembling, too, afraid of what he would see. He glimpsed the rigid face, the staring eyes, the torn clothing. And, in growing horror, he looked for the marks of the dog's teeth. But there were none.

Wonderingly he turned to the girl.

"Karl didn't bite him, Alma. He almost tore the clothes off your uncle's back, but he didn't bite him. It was fright that killed your uncle, stopped his heart. He thought the dog was *going* to bite him.

"Yes," said Alma huskily. "And look—he was wearing your overcoat, Malcolm—the old one you kept in the hall closet. He must have grabbed it by mistake when he went out to find Karl. Maybe that was why Karl attacked him and scared him so."

Malcolm did not answer. And the white, still lips of Graham Munster, set in death, kept their terrible, ironic secret.

