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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Waiter Number 34

By PAUL ERNST

*Two war profiteers come face to face with one of their victims—  
a powerful weird story of war and death*

**C**HATHAM KEARNS and Pierce Harkness walked leisurely toward the two chairs in the center of the Fifth Avenue window of the Console Club.

They were two choice chairs, but no one ever took them save Kearns and Harkness. Since the two had joined the club a dozen years ago, they had taken an unwritten lien on those chairs. No one ever disputed the lien: Harkness was worth nearly six hundred million dollars, and Kearns was cautiously rated at four hundred and fifty millions, though everyone knew his actual holdings totaled more than that.

The two men sat down—Kearns spare and small, like an undersized chicken hawk with frosty gray eyes and lank gray plumage; Harkness tall and corpulent, with small blue eyes like diamond points in a round, good-natured face.

"The same, Kearns?" said Harkness.

"The same," Kearns nodded, his voice dry and precise.

Harkness' big laugh boomed through the vaulted room of the Console Club.

"Vermouth! Is that a drink for a luncheon appetite? A martini would be more to the point."

"Not with my blood-pressure," said Kearns. "And not when I discuss matters of the importance of those to be decided in your board room this afternoon."

Harkness merely laughed again and flicked his gaze toward a figure in the wine-red livery of the club service near by.

The figure came toward their chairs, head inclined deferentially, face pleasant but blank. The man had an extraordinary face. It was very pale, and emaciated. His body was very thin, too, with a thinness which was exaggerated by the fact that he was nearly six feet tall.

**K**EARNS gave the order, frowning a little as he did so.

"A vermouth and a martini. Serve them here, please. And tell the chef we'll lunch, a little later, on the fish I had shipped up here from my Florida place."

"Very good, sir," the man murmured, bowing a little. His voice was dull, pitched in a monotone.

He started toward the club bar.

"Just a minute," Kearns' dry voice rasped.

The man came back.

"You're new here, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," the man said. "That is, I am new to most of the members, sir. I worked here many years ago—till 1917, when I left the club service to enlist."

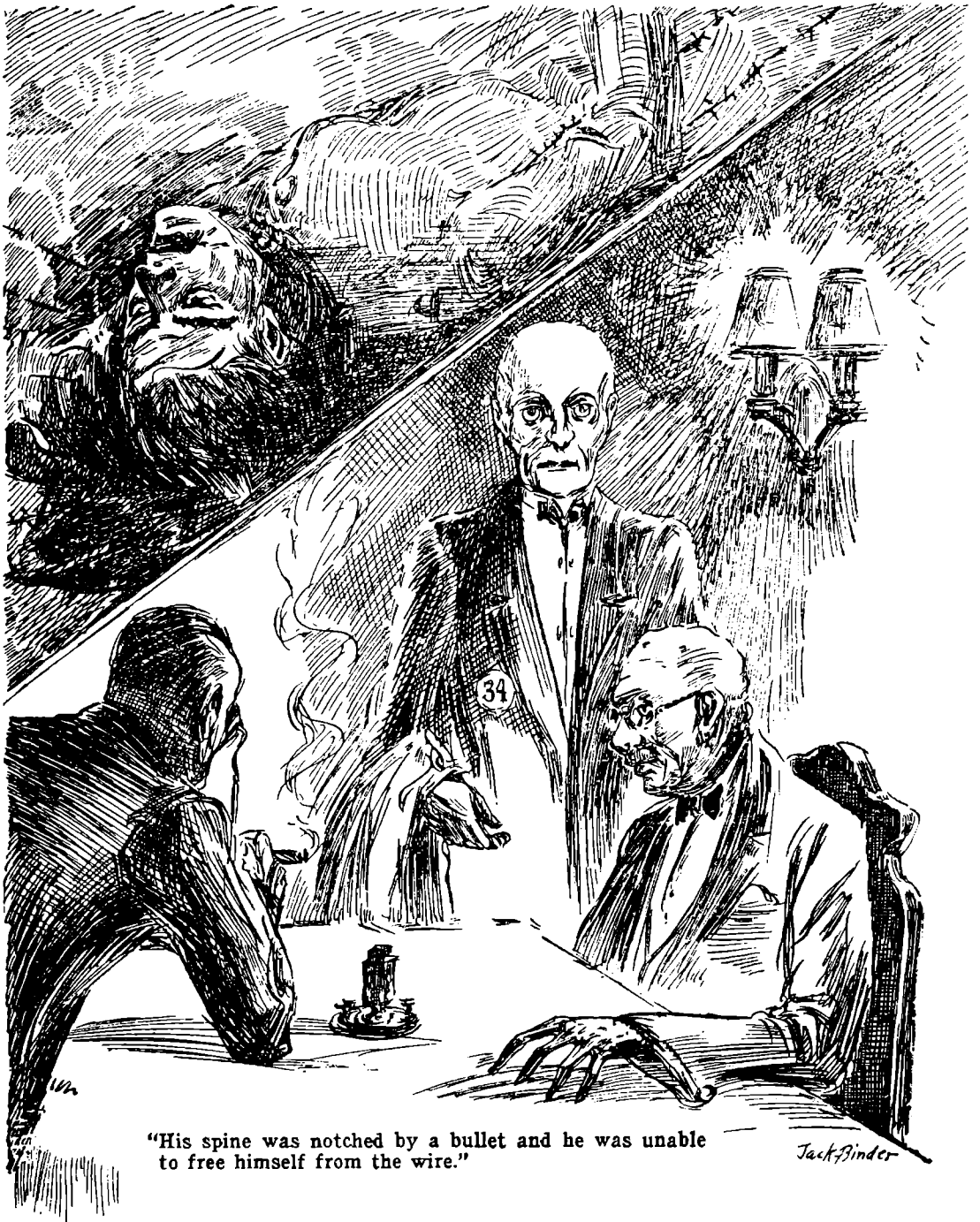
He stood there, thin pale face impassive under Kearns' deepening frown. "Anything else, sir?" he said finally.

"No. I——" Kearns waved his hand irritably. "No. That's all."

The man left. Harkness stared at the irascible line between Kearns' frowning brows.

"What's the matter?" he asked carelessly.

"That man!" snapped Kearns. "That



"His spine was notched by a bullet and he was unable to free himself from the wire."

waiter! Number 34, I think his shield said. I don't like him."

"What's wrong with him?" said Harkness, smiling jovially.

"He has a face like a death's-head. Didn't you notice? He made me feel

positively cold while he stood here."

"Kind of skinny," boomed Harkness in agreement. "What of it?"

"I just don't like him. The club should have cheerful-looking servants. I think I'll speak to the steward——"

"Oh, don't do that," said Harkness, who was a humane and kindly man. "These are rather hard times. Why throw a man out of a job just because you don't like his face?"

Kearns drew his spare shoulders up, then relaxed them. He lit the cigar Harkness passed him.

"I'll have someone else serve us in the future. . . . About this afternoon's meeting, Harkness——"

He drew at the cigar, emitting small, precise puffs of smoke.

"The decision will probably go as you and I want it to go. And just between us two—I think the time is highly propitious."

"So do I," nodded Harkness, modulating his heavy voice so that it would not carry so far. "Did you read this fellow What's-his-name's report in yesterday's *Times*? Nearly two million young fellows just out of schools and can't find jobs. Those kids would go for a good war, Kearns."

Kearns nodded.

"And the rest of the country," Harkness went on, "has more or less got over the jitters of the last war. After all, nearly a generation has passed now."

"Some of the veterans talk pretty strongly," Kearns said cautiously.

"A small minority," Harkness shrugged. "No factor to be considered, when you remember the publicity channels we control. Radio, newspapers, politicians."

THEIR waiter came toward them with their drinks on a small tray. He inclined his head—he was the acme of subservience—and set the vermouth on the stand beside Kearns and the martini on the one next to Harkness.

"I'll sign the check," said Kearns, reaching for the pad and pencil on the tray.

"No, I'll sign it," boomed Harkness.

Kearns allowed his hand to be beaten by Harkness'.

"Anything else, sir?" said the waiter, taking back the signed check with long, very white fingers.

"That's all. . . . Wait." Harkness looked in his cigar-case. "Bring me half a dozen cigars. The man at the counter knows my brand."

"Very good, sir," murmured waiter number 34.

Harkness stared after the man with a small frown on his own face. Then he looked at Kearns.

"He is a peculiar kind of fellow, at that, though I can't put my finger on it. He's just—peculiar. Well, no matter. As I was saying, the human material for war exists in abundance—in these young people who have nothing on earth to do with themselves. And we have our propaganda machine in perfect shape—and now we have a lighted fuse to start war with."

"Precisely," nodded Kearns, sipping at his drink. "The *All Alone* incident is made to order."

"The United States and Great Britain are trying to settle the matter peacefully, though," said Harkness, pursing his lips.

"They can't if we bring enough pressure to bear on the two governments," said Kearns, his frosty eyes colder even than their wont. "Think of the points:

"The *All Alone*, an Australian ship, is suspected of bringing dope into our country. It turns out that suspicions were based on fact, but that's neither here nor there. Our Coast Guard cutters sink the boat when it refuses to stop at a shot across her bows. You see? A ship owned by a citizen of the British Empire is sunk, and the lives of British subjects jeopardized by our Coast Guard service! A thousand wars have been started for less reason than that."

"But the British don't want to make anything of the incident," grunted Harkness. "They agree the boat had no business trying to smuggle dope into the United States——"

"They'll talk differently when our British Export branches get busy. And a protest note from them can be magnified into an ugly thing. You know that, Harkness."

"I know," said Harkness, his amiable smile beginning to make its appearance on his good-natured face. "I'm just bringing up, in advance, the objections a few of our directors may bring up this afternoon."

"Those objections will be quickly disposed of," said Kearns, lips thinning masterfully under his hawk nose. "It's war—whenever we want it—and you and I know that if no one else does!"

"Yes," nodded Kearns. "War——"

He stopped. Waiter number 34 had appeared suddenly beside them with the ordered cigars on his little tray. Harkness stared at him keenly with his little, diamond-point blue eyes. The man's emaciated white face showed no sign that he had overheard anything.

"Will that be all, sir?"

"That's all," Harkness said.

"Damn the fellow," Kearns snapped peevishly, when waiter number 34 had left. "He moves like a shadow!"

Harkness grunted, and settled down in his great leather chair a little deeper. He crossed his legs and stared out the window at the shifting human patterns on the Fifth Avenue sidewalk.

"War, Kearns! You know what that means. You remember the last one."

Kearns' commanding gray eyes narrowed almost dreamily.

"Yes. Day and night shifts in your steel mills and chemical plants. All my marginal copper mines, now closed because there isn't enough market to run

them profitably, opened again. All my coal mines humming. Metal and industrial stocks up a thousand per cent."

Precise small puffs came from his lips, from a cigar which burned with microscopic evenness around the ash-edge.

"But the country as a whole profits as well, Harkness. We mustn't forget that. Jobs for thousands, renewed spirit, young men taken into the service instead of rusting in idleness—all this will happen."

"Unless the war ends too quickly," remarked Harkness.

"Again, you only anticipate some of our objecting directors in pessimism, I think," Kearns smiled. "You know we can keep war flaming for months past its normal stopping-point. . . ."

His breath hissed between his teeth. Outright anger appeared on his spare, dominant face. Waiter number 34 had materialized beside their chairs again as though out of nowhere.

"Well? Well?" he snapped to the man.

"Pardon me, sir," the waiter murmured, voice deprecating, "the chef desires to know what salad he shall prepare——"

"Tell Louis to use his own initiative. We'll leave the rest of the luncheon to him. He ought to know what we like by now, and what will go well with the fish."

"Very good, sir."

The man glided away, his tall, thin figure seeming to melt into the shadows of the huge clubroom rather than disappear normally through the end doorway.

**K**EARNS' eyes were icy as he gazed after him.

"Did it ever occur to you," he said to Harkness, "what a lot of things can be overheard by servants?"

"It's occurred to me many times," said

Harkness dryly. "And for that reason I try to keep servants loyal to me. You know—jolly 'em along a bit. But there's no real danger in them if you avoid quoting actual figures and facts in their hearing. . . . Say, it's confoundedly cold in here, today, isn't it?"

"It is rather chilly," Kearns acquiesced, still glaring in the direction of the door through which waiter number 34 had gone.

Harkness finished his martini and chewed at the olive in the bottom.

"No use mincing words, Kearns. We and the interests we control can make a war out of the *All Alone* incident. We shall do so, in effect, this afternoon at the board meeting. Then we can phone our brokers to buy the right stocks, and begin buying raw materials for our factories at the present peace prices. We'll need some ships of our own, too. We can buy back a lot of the bottoms we sawed off at armistice terms seventeen years ago."

Kearns' thin lips parted a little in one of his rare smiles. Small, even teeth showed for a moment.

"War, Harkness," he said slowly. "Wartime orders, wartime profits. . . . Why, I remember a statistician of mine once figured up the profits I made from the battle of Verdun alone——"

Once more a shadow fell across the two men as waiter number 34 appeared beside their chairs.

Into Kearns' frosty eyes crept an expression that would have made any of his employees tremble. But waiter number 34 seemed not to notice.

"Beg pardon, sir," he murmured in his flat, dull voice, "but I thought I heard you gentlemen mention war. Is it your opinion there will be war again soon?"

Dull red surged in Kearns' gray cheek at such colossal impudence. But Harkness shot him a glance that commanded caution.

"There are always wars, my man," he said coolly. "There has never in history been a time when war was not being waged on some portion of the earth's surface."

"But I mean war such as the last big one, sir," said the waiter deferentially. "The World War. Are we facing another such catastrophe?"

"Who can tell?" Harkness said stiffly.

"You can take these glasses away," snapped Kearns.

"Certainly, sir." Waiter number 34 inclined his head. But he moved slowly as he put the empty glasses on his little club tray, and he did not move off at once.

"And I thought I heard one of you mention the battle of Verdun. Were either of you in Verdun, might I inquire?"

Kearns' eyes were icy lightnings. But Harkness, whose rough diplomacy had been a large factor in his enormous financial success, said:

"Hardly! Do you think we're the type to make good bayonet manipulators? I think I can say that our value to our country in time of war is far greater as industrial executives than it would be as soldiers in a trench."

"Of course, sir! I can realize that. But, begging your pardon, you are both in excellent physical shape, and you are both under sixty—I thought perhaps you had been officers during the war."

"That will be all——" Kearns began in a brittle tone.

But waiter number 34 went on.

"Quite a battle, Verdun," he said, gently, abstractedly. "I was in it. I was just a kid at the time. Nineteen. And as raw as any recruit that ever was shipped to fight another man's battles for him."

"Your reminiscences are not at all——" said Kearns in a strangled tone.

"I remember one hour particularly,"

waiter number 34 said almost dreamily. "But then, it is only natural that I should remember that particular hour."

Kearns' angry gaze ranged the club-room for the steward or the assistant steward.

"It was a crowded hour, sir. I was in a sector where the shelling was hardest. The Germans had got our exact range an hour and ten minutes before, and were shelling us out of existence. And we were taking it pretty hard. Most of us in the division were youngsters, and most were as raw as myself.

"There'd been an attempt to go over the top that morning. No-man's land was littered with evidence of our failure.

**R**IGHT in front of our trench there was a pile of legs and arms, where a shell had exploded in a freakish kind of way that had somehow blown bodies out of existence but left the limbs—piled 'em like an untidy little pile of cordwood. Shells do funny things sometimes, sir.

"Beside the pile was a body without a head. That had been our second lieutenant. His uniform was immaculate except for the underside of him that lay in the mud and blood. His body had been untouched. Only his head had been taken off, clean as a whistle, leaving a bit of the neck-bone sticking up.

"But we didn't mind those things so much, sir. You get sort of used to them when you fight to save your country's honor. It was something else we minded more.

"Hanging in the barbed wire was a thing almost as ripped up as any of the dead youngsters that littered the ground. This was a buddy of mine by the name of Carrigan. He'd got caught in the wire and had had his spine notched by a machine-gun bullet so that he'd been paralyzed and unable to free himself. He'd hung there ever since, still alive."

Kearns' eyes flashed into Harkness'. But Harkness shook his head almost imperceptibly, though his own face was stony with anger.

"You'd laugh, sir, if I told you all the freakish tricks I saw war play. And one of them was the way Carrigan kept on living while he hung in the barbed wire.

"The air was crowded with shrapnel pieces and bullets—actually choked with flying metal. But only a little of it hit Carrigan, and then not mortally. He seemed to hang in a charmed spot. But Carrigan didn't want to be in a charmed spot. He wanted the end to come.

"You see, first he'd had his foot taken off at the ankle, as he hung there, and the mud his legs were dragging in had somehow kept him from bleeding to death. Then he'd had half his face shot away. And finally, toward the end, a bit of shrapnel had raked across his abdomen in such a way as to slice it half open, so that he—he kept spilling his vitals, if you understand me, sir.

"It was then that he'd stopped screaming for death to take him and began—just screaming. He didn't seem to stop for breath at all. He just yelled, on and on, staring at the part of him trailing through the rip. And it was that screaming that affected us in the trench so much.

"As I say, we were just a bunch of kids, fresh out of school when we enlisted. And our minds didn't seem tough enough to stand that screaming.

"We tried to kill Carrigan, because we all had loved him. But our fingers shook a little so that none of us could hit him, any more than the bullets from the other side could. He just hung there with a broken spine, and with his foot shot off and his body sliced open like a melon, screaming on and on out of his half of a face.

"The barbed wire held him up solidly. It was fine, strong wire. I think it had

been made by one of your factories, Mr. Harkness, sir.

"You'd never believe what a body can go through before it dies. You'd have to see with your own eyes something like the drawn-out death of Carrigan. But it's hard to see a thing like that and stay sane. At least it was hard for us, his friends.

"All of us were going a little crazy, with the screaming and all, before that hour that sticks in my mind was over. And all of us were showing it in the way kids do in the trenches.

"The boy next to me—seventeen, he was, he'd lied about his age—had bitten through his lips so that I saw the white of his teeth through the red of a gash that was like a second mouth. Beyond him a farm lad a year older than myself was laughing. His laughing mingled with Carrigan's screaming, when both weren't drowned out by artillery fire, and I don't know which was worse. As he laughed he fired at Carrigan, loaded and fired, loaded and fired, and couldn't hit him.

"Down the line a youngster had finally stood up with a yell and climbed over the top to go and bayonet Carrigan. Of course he hadn't lasted very long. Three or four steps, he took, and he went down with something besides blood filling his helmet from a dozen holes in his head.

"That's all, sir. It was right after that that we started to yell as loud as we could, in a kind of chorus. And that drowned out the sound of Carrigan's yelling. It must have been a funny sight—all of us in that trench shouting, anything we could think of from prayers to blasphemy, with the farm lad's crazy laughing sounding above the rest. But then you see funny things in a war."

Waiter number 34 took a step away with his little tray on which the glasses reflected with crystal sleekness the sun-

light pouring in the window of the Console Club.

"I hope you didn't mind my telling you these things, sir. I didn't mean to bore you—I just had the picture brought back to me, by your mention of war, of that hour when we yelled and stuffed our fingers in our ears to keep from hearing the screaming of the thing hanging in Mr. Harkness' barbed wire. Just an hour, seen by one man. It means little, of course. . . .

"It was just after we all started our yelling that a big one hit squarely in our trench and exploded."

He nodded subserviently, apologetically, and went off.

Behind him, Kearns sat rigid in his big chair, too angry for a moment to speak. Harkness' full face was apoplectic in hue.

"I'll have the steward fire him if it's the last thing I ever do!" Kearns said at last. "And I'll see to it that he's black-listed everywhere in town! Such infernal insolence——"

"Fire him, yes," agreed Harkness, whose face had begun to get back some of its normal good-nature. "But let's not have him blacklisted, Kearns. Give the man a chance to find another job, if he can."

For Harkness was a humane and kindly man. . . .

**W**AITER number 34 went in through the swinging doors of the kitchen and set his tray and the empty glasses on the big dishwasher's rack. Then he moved slowly, wearily, toward the service door that opened onto narrow Eighty-fourth Street.

At the dishwashing machine a man with an artificial hand suddenly clutched the shoulder of the young fellow who assisted him. His fingers bit with a force that made the lad exclaim aloud.



"The man that just went out the door!" the dishwasher gasped. "That waiter! Who is he?"

"Number 34," growled the youngster, rubbing his shoulder.

"But his name! What's his name?"

"I don't know. He just started working here this morning——"

The man with the artificial hand ran toward the service door, opened it and looked up and down the street.

There was no sign of the figure in the wine-red club livery.

The dishwasher went back to his big machine, eyes cloudy and troubled.

"What's eating you?" said the younger man.

"That waiter—number 34," replied the dishwasher slowly. "His face looked familiar. Looked like a friend of mine that used to be a waiter here—same number, 34, too—back in 1916 when you were still a baby. But it couldn't have been him."

"Why not?" shrugged his assistant. "Guys do come back, sometimes, to work at places they worked in a long time ago."

"Not this man," said the dishwasher. "He died at Verdun in 1918."