# Dimension of Darkness

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“Don’t shoot,” says Ellenbogan. “For the love of science, don’t shoot!”

“Sorry, doc,” I says, slipping the safety catch. “I got my orders. That’s the way it goes. Got any last words?”

“Look, Mr.—what’s your name?”

“Matt Reilly. Make it snappy, bud. I gotta be back in a few minutes for a tote job.”

“I see,” he says slowly. “You don’t know what you’re doing, do you?”

“I don’t see how that matters,” I says, “but they tell me you welched on a five grand pony bet. That right?”

“Yes,” he says, breaking into a cold sweat. “But look—it’s awfully important that I don’t die for a few minutes at least. Someone told me that horse couldn’t lose, and I needed the money. I took my chances, I know. But will you let me off for just ten minutes while I wind up my work?”

“Ten minutes,” I brood. “Okay, doc. But no funny business. And you don’t step out of this lab.”

“Thank you, Mr. Reilly,” he gasps, wiping his brow. “You can trust me.” So then he goes puttering around his machinery, taping wires together, plugging light-cords in, tinkering up coils and connecting radio tubes and things. And I kept my eye on him and the clock. After a while I remind him, “Four minutes to go, doc. How about it?”

“I’ll be ready,” he answers, not looking up, even. “I’ll be ready. Just this one interphasometer reading—will you look at this, please—my eyes—it’s a very small dial—”

“Waddya want? Be specific,” I says.

He freezes up as he sees my gun again. “Just tell me what number this needle is resting on, please. That’s all I have to know.”

“Okay. This dial?” He nods, so I casually put my gun in his side and bend over to look. It was a seven. “Lucky seven, doc,” I says. “And I think your time’s up. Turn around, please.”

“Seven,” he broods, seeming to forget all about me. “So it checks. The number proves it.” Then, quick like a fox, he spins around and throws himself at a switch. Startled, I blazes away with the roscoe and some glass breaks.

“Look out!” yells Doc Ellenbogan. “You’ll be caught—” And then I sees that there’s something awful solid and black turning and growing in the middle of a piece of machinery. “Gas!” I thinks, whipping out a handkerchief and clamping it over my nose. I aimed straight at the doc this time, before running. But then the black thing explodes in one big rush and I’m flat on my back.

“I’m sorry I had to get you involved,” says Ellenbogan. “How do you feel?” Then I see that I’m lying down inhaling smelling-salts that the doc is holding. Like a flash I reaches for my heater. But it’s gone, of course. Then I guess I says some nasty things to the doc, on account of even the Frank V. Coviccio West Side Social and Athletic Club don’t use gas. And you know what louses they are.

“Don’t misunderstand, please,” says the doc with remarkable self-control, considering the names I applied to him. “Don’t misunderstand. I have your gun, and I’ll give it back to you as soon as you understand clearly what has happened. Where, for instance, do you think you are?”

And there’s something in his voice that makes me sit up and take notice. So help me, we ain’t in his lab or anywhere near Columbia University that I can see. So I ask him what’s cooking.

“The fourth dimension,” he says, cold and quiet. So I look again. And this time I believe him. Because the sky, what there was of it, is the blackest black you could ever hope to see, and not a star in sight. The ground is kind of soft, and there’s no grass to speak of, except a kind of hairy stuff in tufts. And I still don’t know how we can see each other, the doc and me, because there isn’t any light at all. He glows and so do I, I guess—anyway, that’s what it looks like. “Okay, doc,” I says. “I’ll take your word for it.”

So what does he do? He hands me back my gun! I check the roscoe for condition and aim it. “Mr. Reilly!” he says sharply. “What are you intending to do now?”

“Plug you like I was supposed to do,” I reply. And instead of looking worried he only smiles at me as if I’m a worm or something. “Surely,” he says, gentle and sweet, “there wouldn’t be any point to that, would there?”

“I dunno about that, doc. But Lucco would damage me real bad if I didn’t do the job I’m supposed to. So that’s the way it is, I guess. You ready?”

“Look, Mr. Reilly,” he snaps. “I don’t take you for an especially bright person, but surely you must realize that this is neither the time nor the place for carrying out your plans. I don’t want to lose my temper, but if you ever want to get back to your own world you’d better not kill me just yet. While I appreciate your professional attitude, I assure you that it would be the height of folly to do anything except take my orders. I have no weapons, Mr. Reilly, but I have a skull full of highly speciallized information and techniques which will be more valuable to you personally than my cadaver. Let’s reach an understanding now, shall we?”

So I thinks it over. And Ellenbogan’s right, of course. “Okay, doc,” says little Matt. “I’m on your staff. Now tell me when do we eat—and what?”

“Try some of that grass,” he says. “It looks nutritious.” I picks a bunch of the grass and drop it in a hurry. The crazy stuff twists and screams like it was alive. “That was a bum steer, doc,” I says. “Many more of those and we may part company abrupt-like. What about food and water?” And the minute I think of water I get thirsty. You know how it is.

“There should be people around,” he mutters looking over his shoulder. “The preselector indicated protoplasm highly organized.” I take him by the arm. “Look, doc,” I says, “suppose you begin at the beginning and tell me just where we are and how we get back home and why you brought us here. And anything else that comes into your head. Now talk!”

“Of course,” he says, mild and a little hurt. “I just thought you wouldn’t be interested in the details. Well, I said this is the fourth dimension. That is only approximately true. It is a cognate plane of some kind—only one of the very many which exist side-by-side with our own. And of course I didn’t mean to take you here with me; that was an accident. I called to you to get out of the way while you could, but the pressure belt caught you while you were busily carrying out your orders, which were to shoot me dead.

“And incidentally, it would have been better for you if you had escaped the belt, for I would have stayed in this plane as long as possible, and would have been as good as dead to you and your Mr. Lucco.”

“It ain’t that,” I interjects. “It’s mostly the reputation we got to maintain. What if wise-guys like you—meaning no offense, doc—came in on us every day with heavy sugar to bet, and then welched? The business wouldn’t be worth the upkeep in lead. Get me?”

“I—ah—think so,” he says. “At any rate, the last-minute alterations I was making when you called on me were intended to take me into a selected plane which would support life. It happens that the coefficient of environment which this calls for is either three, four or seven. I was performing the final test with your kind assistance only a few minutes ago, if you remember. When you read ‘seven’ from the dial I realized that according to my calculations I would land in a plane already inhabited by protoplasmal forms. So, Mr. Reilly, here we are, and we’ll have to make the best of it until I find equipment somehow or other to send you back into your world.”

“That,” I says, “is fair enough—hey, doc! What’re them babies doing?” I am referring to certain ungainly things like centipedes, but very much bigger, which are mounted by several people each. They loom up on the horizon like bats out of hell, not exactly luminous but—well, I see them and there isn’t any light from anywhere to see them by. They must be luminous, I think.

“Protoplasm,” he says, turning white as a sheet. “But whether friendly or enemy protoplasm I don’t know. Better get out your gun. But don’t fire until you’re positive—utterly, utterly positive—that they mean us harm. Not if I can help it do we make needless enemies.”

Up scuttles one of the four centipedes. The driver of the awful brute looks down. He is dressed in a kind of buckskin shirt, and he wears a big brown beard. “Hello,” he says, friendly-like. “Where did you chaps drop from?”

Doc Ellenbogan rallies quick. He says, “We just got here. My name’s Ellenbogan and this is Mr. Reilly.”

“Hmm—Irish,” says the gent in the buckskins. I notice that he has an English accent.

“Wanta make sumpn of it?” I ask, patting the roscoe.

“No—sorry,” he says with a bright smile. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Peter DeManning, hereditary Knight of the Cross of Britain and possibly a Viscount. Our heraldry and honors got very confused about the fourth generation. We’re descended from Lord DeManning, who came over way back in 1938.”

“But this is only 1941!” protests the doc. Then he hauls himself up short. “Foolish of me—time runs slower here, of course. Was it accidental—coming over?”

“Not at all,” answers the gent. “Old Lord Peter always hated the world—thoroughly a misanthrope. So finally he gathered together his five favorite mistresses and a technical library and crossed the line into this plane. He’s still alive, by the by. The climate of this place must be awfully salubrious. Something in the metabolism favors it.”

“How many of youse guys are there?” I ask, so as not to seem dumb. He looks at me coldly. “About three hundred,” he says. “A few more due shortly. Would you two care to join us? We’re back from a kind of raid—tell you all about it if you’re interested.”

“Of course,” says the doc. And without hesitation he climbs up the side of that scaly, leggy horror and perches next to the guy. Sir Peter looks down at me and says, “I think, Mr. Reilly, that you’d better ride on the other bug. This one’s heavily burdened already. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” I says viciously. And so I went back to the next thing, which looked at me, curling its awful head around, as I passed.

“Right here, Mr. Reilly,” someone calls down.

“Thanks, lady,” I says, accepting the helping hand reached down. Settled on the back of the centipede, I shivered at the clammy feeling.

“Feels strange?” asks someone. I turned around to see who was the person who would call riding a hundred-foot bug strange and let it go at that. I stayed turned around, just staring.

“Is something wrong, Mr. Reilly?” she asks anxiously. “I hope you’re not ill.”

“No,” I gulps at last. “Not at all. Only we just haven’t got anything back home that stacks up to you. What do they call you?”

She turns a sweet, blushing pink and looks down. “Lady Cynthia Ashton,” she says. “Only of course the title is by courtesy. My ancestress Miss Ashton and Lord DeManning weren’t married. None of his consorts were married to him. Do you approve of polygamy?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, Lady Cynthia,” I assure her. “I never got farther than elementary algebra.” At which she looks at me queerly while I study her. She’s wearing the kind of clothes you sometimes dream about on the woman you love—a barbaric kind of outfit of soft doeskin, fitted to her waist and falling to her knees, where there was an inch of fringe. Red and blue squares and circles were painted here and there on the outfit, and she wore a necklace of something’s teeth—just what, I don’t like to think.

And her blonde hair fell to her shoulders, loosely waved. No makeup, of course—except for the patches of bright blue on her cheeks and forehead. “What’s that for?” I asks her, pointing.

She shrugs prettily. “I don’t know. The Old Man—that’s Sir Peter—insists on it. Something about woad, he says.”

I gets a sudden fright. “You wouldn’t be married, would you?” I ask, breaking into a cold sweat.

“Why, no, not yet,” she answers. “I’ve been proposed to by most of the eligible men and I don’t know which to accept. Tell me, Mr. Reilly—do you think a man with more than four wives is a better risk than a man with less? That’s about the midpoint—four, I mean.”

She sees the look in my eyes and gets alarmed. “You must be ill,” she says. “It’s the way this horrid bug is moving. Alfred!” she calls to the driver. “Slow down—Mr. Reilly doesn’t feel well.”

“Certainly, Cynthia,” says Alfred.

“He’s a dear boy,” she confides. “But he married too young—my three-quarter sister, Harriet, and my aunt Beverly. You were saying, Mr. Reilly?”

“I wasn’t saying, but I will. To be on the up an’ up, Lady Cynthia, I’m shocked. I don’t like the idea of every guy keepin’ a harem.” And little Matt says to himself that while he likes the idea in the abstract, he doesn’t like to think of Lady Cynthia as just another wife. And then I get another shock. “Raill-ly!” says Lady Cynthia, freezing cold as an icicle.

Alfred, the driver, looks back. “What did the beast say, darling?” he asks nastily.

She shudders. “I’m sorry, Alfred. I—I couldn’t repeat it. It was obscene!”

“Indeed?” asks Alfred. He looks at me coldly. “I think,” he says, “that you’d better not talk with Lady Cynthia any more. Mr. Reilly, I fear you are no gentleman.” And right then and there little Matt would have slugged him if he didn’t send the bug on the double-quick so all I could do is hang on and swear.

Things grew brighter ahead. There seems to actually be real light of some kind. And then a sun heaves over the horizon. Not a real sun; that would be asking for too much, but a pretty good sun, though tarnished and black in spots.

There is a little kind of house with stables big enough for whales in sight, so the bugs stop and everybody gets down. I hunt out Doc Ellenbogan right away. “Doc,” I complains, “what’s the matter with me? Am I poison? I was chatting away with Lady Cynthia and I happens to say that I believe in the family as a permanent institution. And after that she won’t speak to me!”

He gets thoughtful. “I must remember that, Matt,” he says. “Such an introverted community would have many tabus. But they are a fascinating people. Did they tell you the purpose of their raid—from where they were returning?”

“Nope. She didn’t mention it.”

“All I got was a vague kind of hint. They have an enemy, it seems.”

“Probably some bird who believes in the sanctity of the home,” I suggests nastily. “Or a tribe of ministers.”

“Nothing so mild, I fear,” says the doc shaking his head. “In the most roundabout way Sir Peter told me that they have lost five men. And five men, to a community of three hundred, is a terrible loss indeed.”

“That’s fine, ” I says. “The sooner they’re wiped out, the better I will like it. And while they go under, will you please get to work so I can get back into a decent world?”

“I’ll do my best, Matt. Come on—they’re leaving.” The bugs get bedded down at the stables, it seems, and they go the rest of the way on foot. Sir Peter joins us, giving me the double-o.

“I expect you’ll want to meet the Old Man,” he says. “And I’m sure he’ll want to meet you. Interesting coot, rather. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” the doc assures him. “There are some things I want to find out.” He gives Sir Peter a chilly look with that, and that gent looks away hastily.

“Is that the city?” I ask, pointing. Sir Peter casts a pained eye at my extended finger.

“Yes,” he says. “What do you think of it?”

So I look again. Just a bunch of huts, of course. They’re neat and clean, some of them bigger than you’d expect, but huts just the same. “Don’t you believe in steel-frame construction?” I ask, and Sir Peter looks at me with downright horror. “Excuse me!” he nearly shouts and runs away from us—I said runs—and begins to talk with some of the others.

“I’m afraid,” says the doc, “that you did it again, Matt.”

“Gripes almighty—how do I know what’ll offend them and what won’t? Am I a magician?” I complain.

“I guess you aren’t,” he says snappily. “Otherwise you’d watch your tongue. Now here comes Sir Peter again. You’d better not say anything at all this time.”

The gent approaches, keeping a nervous eye on me, and says in one burst, “Please follow me to see the Old Man. And I hope you’ll excuse him any errors he may make—he has a rather foul tongue. Senile, you know—older than the hills.” So we follow him heel and toe to one of the largest of the cottages. Respectfully Sir Peter tapped on the door.

“Come in, ye bleedin’ sturgeon!” thunders a voice.

“Tut!” says Sir Peter. “He’s cursing again. You’d better go in alone—good luck!” And in sheer blue terror he walks off, looking greatly relieved.

“Come in and be blowed, ye fish-faced octogenarian pack of truffle-snouted shovel-headed beagle-mice!” roars the voice.

Says the doc, “That means us.” So he pushes open the door and walks in.

An old man with savage white whiskers stares us in the face. “Who the devil are you?” he bellows. “And where are my nitwit offspring gone?”

Without hedging the doc introduces himself: “I am Doctor Ellenbogan and this is Mr. Reilly. We have come from Earth, year 1941. You must be Lord Peter DeManning?”

The old man stares at him, breathing heavily. “I am,” he says at last. “And what the devil may you be doing in my world?”

“Fleeing from an assassin,” says the doc. “And this is the assassin. We are here by accident, but I had expected a greater degree of courtesy than you seem to see fit to bestow on us. Will you explain, please?”

“And that goes double for me,” I snap, feeling plenty tough.

“Pah!” grunts the old man. “Muscling in, that’s what you’re doing! Who invited you? This is my experiment and I’m not going to see it ruined by any blundering outsider. You a physicist?”

“Specializing in electronics,” says the doc coldly.

“Thought so! Poppycock! I used a physicist to get me here—used him, mark you—for my own purposes. I’m a scientist myself. The only real scientist—the only real science there is!”

“And what might that be?” I ask.

“Humanity, you—assassin. The science of human relationships. Conditioned reflexes from head to toe. Give me the child and I’ll give you the man! I proved it—proved it here with my own brains and hands. Make what you like of that. I won’t tell you another word. Scientist—physicist—pah!”

“He’s nuts!” I whisper to the doc.

“Possibly. Possibly,” he whispers back. “But I doubt it. And there are too many mysteries here.” So he turns to the old man again. “Lord DeManning,” he says smoothly, “there are things I want to find out.”

“Well,” snarls the old thing, “you won’t from me. Now get out!” And he raises his hand—and in that hand is a huge Colt .45 automatic—the meanest hand weapon this side of perdition. I dive for the roscoe, but the doc turns on me quickly. “Cut it out, Matt,” he hisses. “None of that. Let’s go outside and look around.”

Once we are outside I complain, “Why didn’t you let me plug him? He can’t be that fast on the trigger. You practically need a crowbar to fire one of those things he had.”

“Not that cunning old monster,” broods the doc. “Not him. He knows a lot—probably has a hair-trigger on the gun. He’s that kind of mind—I know the type. Academic run wild. Let’s split up here and scout around.” So he wanders off vaguely, polishing his glasses.

A passing figure attracts my eye. “Lady Cynthia!” I yell.

The incredibly beautiful blonde turns and looks at me coldly. “Mr. Reilly,” she says, “you were informed of my sentiments towards you. I hope you make no further attempts at—”

“Hold it!” I says. “Stop right then and there. What I want to know is what did I do that I shouldn’t have done? Lady Cynthia, I—I like you an awful lot, and I don’t think we should—” I’m studying her eyes like an eagle. The second I see them soften I know that I’m in.

“Mr. Reilly,” she says with great agitation, “follow me. They’d kill me if they found out, but—” She walks off slowly, and I follow her into a hut.

“Now,” she says, facing me fair and square, “I don’t know why I should foul my mouth with things that I would rather die than utter, but there’s something about you—” She brings herself to rights with a determined toss of her head. “What do you want to know?”

“First,” I says, “tell me where you were coming back from this afternoon, or whatever it was.”

She winces, actually winces, and turns red down to her neck, not with the pretty kind of pink blush that a dame can turn on and off, but with the real hot, red blush of shame that hurts like sunburn. Before answering she turns so she doesn’t have to look at me. “It was a counter-raid,” she says. “Against—” and here I feel actual nausea in her voice— “against the Whites.” Defiantly she faces me again.

Bewildered I says, “Whites?” and she loses her temper. Almost hoarsely she cries, “Don’t say that filthy name! Isn’t it enough that you made me speak it?” And she hurries from the hut almost in a dead run.

But this time little Matt doesn’t follow her. He’s beginning to suspect that everybody’s crazy except him or maybe vice versa.

Then there were sudden yells outside the hut, and Little Matt runs out to see what’s up. And bedad if there aren’t centipedes by the score pouring down on the little village! Centipedes mounted by men with weapons—axes, knives and bows. A passing woman yells at me, “Get to the walls—fight the bloody rotters! Kill them all!” She is small and pretty; the kind of gal that should never get angry. But her face was puffed with rage, and she was gnashing her small, even teeth.

As I see it the centipedes form a ring around the village, at full gallop like Indians attacking a wagon-train. And, like Indians, firing arrows into the thick of the crowd. So I take out the roscoe on account of the people on the centipedes are getting off and rushing the village.

I find myself engaged with a big, savage guy dreamin’ homicidal visions in which I took a big part. He has a stone axe with a fine, sharp blade, and I have to fend it off as well as I can by dodging, inasmuch as if I tried to roll it off my shoulder or arm, like a prize-fighter would, I would find that I did not have any longer a shoulder or arm.

Little Matt gets in a clean one to the jaw, nearly breaking his hand, and works the guy around to one of the huts, through other knots of fighting men. Then the big guy lands one with the handle of the axe on my left forearm, nearly paralyzing it. And to my great surprise he says, “Take that, you rotten Black!”

Not wishing to argue I keeps on playing with him until he is ready to split my skull with one blow. At which point I dodge, and the axe is stuck firm in the side of the hut. Taking my time to aim it, I crack his skull open with the roscoe’s butt and procede to my next encounter.

This gent I trip up with the old soji as taught in the New York Police Department and elsewhere, and while he is lying there I kick him in the right place on the side of his head, which causes him to lose interest.

“Matt! For God’s sake!” yells someone. It is Doc Ellenbogan, seriously involved with two persons, both using clubs with more enthusiasm than skill. I pick up a rock from the ground and demonstrate in rapid succession just what you can do with a blunt instrument once you learn how. There’s a certain spot behind the ear—

I drag the doc into the nearest hut. “Why do they call us Blacks?” I demand. “And who are they anyway?”

“Matt,” he says quietly, “let me have your gun.”

Without questions I fork over the roscoe. “What plans you got, chief?” I say, feeling very good after the free-for-all.

“Things begin to fall into place,” he says. “Sir Peter, the chap we met, broke down and told me his viewpoint. It wasn’t much, but I can tell there’s something horrible going on.” He actually shudders. “I’m going to see the Old Man. You please stay outside the hut and see that none of the Whites interrupt us.”

“I don’t think they will,” I inform him, peeking out. “The battle’s over and—awk!—they ain’t taking prisoners.” I had just seen that pretty little woman bashing in the head of an unconscious White on the ground. “So the Whites are those people that just came and—left?” I asks. “And we’re the Blacks?”

“That’s right, Matt.”

“Sorry, chief,” I says mournfully. “I don’t get it.”

So we leave for the hut of the Old Man.

While I stand guard outside there is a long conversation in muffled tones; then, so quick they almost sounded like one shot, the roar of the Old Man’s .45 and the crack of the roscoe. I bust through the door, and see the doc bleeding from his shoulder and the Old Man lying very dead on his floor.

I tape up the doc as well as I can, but a .45 leaves a terrible cavity in a man. As soon as he is able to talk I warn him: “You better get a doctor to see after that thing. It’ll infect as sure as fate.”

“It probably will,” says the doc weakly. Then he mutters, “That old monster! That horrible old—” and the rest is words that seem all the worse coming as they do from the doc, who is a mild-mannered person in appearance.

“You mean his late nibs?” I ask.

“Yes. That fiend! Listen: I don’t know what set him off on that train of thought, but he had a pet theory of some kind. He told me all about it, with his gun trained on me. He was going to kill me when he was quite finished. I had your gun in my pocket, my hand on the trigger.

“He actually was a noble of Britain, and he used every cent he had on lecherous pursuits and the proof of his doctrine—a kind of superman-cum-troglodyte-cum-Mendel-cum-Mills-cum-Wells-cum-Pavlov social theory. Fantastic, of course. Couldn’t work except in a case like this.

“So he financed research along lines much like mine and brought himself and mistresses and library and equipment into this plane. And then he proceeded with his scheme. It was his aim to propagandize a race with such thoroughness that his will would be instinct to his descendants! And he succeeded, in a limited way.

“Arbitrarily, he divided his offspring into two camps, about the third generation, and ingrained in each a hatred of the other. To further the terrible joke he named them arbitrarily Black and White, after the innocent war-games of his youth. His aim was—ultimately—to have both camps exterminate the other. For him to be the only survivor. Madman! Hideous madman!”

“That all?” I ask, not wanting to tire him.

“No. He has the equipment to get back into our own plane. I’m going to use it now to send you back, Matt. You can say with almost perfect veracity that you bumped me off as per orders.”

“But why don’t you send these people back?” I ask, being real bright.

“They wouldn’t like it, Matt. It would be too great a strain on them. Besides, in the month or so that I’ll last here, with this wound in my shoulder, I can throw a perfectly effective monkeywrench into the Old Man’s plans. I think that in a few years the Blacks and Whites will be friends.”

“I got a better idea,” I says with authority. “You go back to Earth and I stay here. You can get patched up by any good medico. And I won’t mind it much.” And that’s what little Matt says, thinking of a golden-haired lady who might be taught that monogamy ain’t necessarily a deadly sin.

So Judy, you be a good little sister and open that safe-deposit box of mine—doc will give you the key—and give doc five thousand to square himself with Lucco. And you take the rest and quit that chain-store job and start yourself the swellest beauty parlor in town, just like you always wanted to.

And keep in touch with doc. He’s a great guy, but he needs somebody around to see that he don’t hurt himself.