

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: The Dark Angel

Date of first publication: 1946

Author: Henry Kuttner (1915-1958)

Date first posted: March 9 2013

Date last updated: March 9 2013

Faded Page eBook #20130318

This eBook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Mary Meehan & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

THE DARK ANGEL

By HENRY KUTTNER

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was first published in Startling Stories, Vol. 13, No. 2, March, 1946. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

Juke-box music roared through the smoky gin-mill. The old man I was looking for sat in a booth far back, staring at nothing, his shaking, veined hands gripping a tiny glass. I recognized him.

Tim Hathaway sensed that his wife was growing different—but it took him a long time to learn just why!

He was the one. He could tell me what I wanted to know. After what I had seen tonight, at the Metropolitan—

He was already drunk. His eyes were dull and glazed. As I slid into the booth beside him, I heard him mumbling something, over and over.

"The doll—Joanna, you shouldn't—Joanna—"

He was lost in the dream-world of alcoholism. He saw me, and he didn't see me. I was one of the phantoms of memory that thronged about him.

"Tell me about it," I said.

And even that, from a stranger, couldn't penetrate the mists that fogged his brain. The soul was gone from him. He reacted like a puppet to my words. Once or twice I had to put a few questions to him, but he answered them—and went on—coming back always to Joanna, and the doll.

I was sorry for him. He was already damned. But it was my business to find out the truth about what had happened at the Metropolitan an hour ago.

"A long time ago," he said thickly. "That's when it started. The night we had that big snowfall, when—or even before that? I don't know."

He didn't know. Later, after the change had begun to be noticeable, he tried to remember, to dredge from his memory tiny incidents that might have been significant. Yet how was he to tell with any certainty?

Gestures, words, actions that might once have seemed perfectly normal were now, in retrospect, freighted with a subtle flavor of horrible uncertainty. But on the night of the snowstorm he had first begun to wonder.

He was forty then, Joanna thirty-five. They had begun to consider settling down to a comfortable middle age, and there was no reason why they shouldn't. Tim Hathaway had risen, in twenty years, from a junior clerk in an advertising firm to general manager, with a good salary and no worries worth mentioning.

They had an apartment in Manhattan, and a bad-tempered little Pekingese named Tzu-Ling. There were no children. Both Tim and Joanna would have welcomed a couple of kids, but it just hadn't turned out that way.

A nice-looking pair, the Hathaways—Joanna with her hair still jet-black, her skin smooth and unlined, and a fresh, sparkling vigor about her—Tim a solid, quiet man with a gentle face and streaks of gray at his temples.

They were beginning to be invited to dinners with the conservative set, but every so often they'd have a quiet binge to keep the grass green.

"But not too green," Joanna said, as the big sedan toiled down the Henry Hudson Parkway with flurries of snow racing toward the windshield. "That gin wasn't so hot."

"Cigarette, please, dear," Tim said. "Thanks. Well, I don't know where Sanderson gets his liquor, but I think he must dredge it up out of the East River. My stomach's rumbling."

"Watch that—" She spoke too late. Out of the blurry storm twin headlights rushed at them.

Tim swung the wheel desperately and felt the sick twisting of gravity that meant a bad skid. In a moment the sedan jolted and stopped. Tim cursed quietly and got out.

"Our rear wheels are in the ditch," he told Joanna through the open window. "You'd better get out. Even with our lights on, a car wouldn't be able to see us till it was too late."

He contemplated the prospect of having the sedan smashed into a heap of junk, and it seemed the likeliest possibility. As Joanna's fur-coated figure joined him, he bent, gripped the rear bumper and heaved mightily. But he couldn't budge the car's enormous weight.

Grunting, he let go.

"I'll see if I can gun her out," he said. "Wait out here a minute, Jo, and yell if a car comes."

"Okay."

He played the clutch and gunned the motor. Then, with catastrophic suddenness, he saw the reflected gleam of headlights approaching.

It was too late to avoid a crash. He jammed his foot on the accelerator, felt the rear wheels skid around without traction—and suddenly, incredibly, the car *jumped*. There was no other word for it. Someone or something had lifted the sedan and thrust it forward on to the road.

Instinctive reflex made him jockey accelerator and steering-wheel. The other car sped by, missing him by a fraction. White-faced, Tim eased the sedan to the side of the road and got out.

A dark figure loomed through the snowy gusts.

"Joanna?"

There was a pause.

"Yes, Tim."

"What happened?"

"I—don't know."

"You didn't try to lift the car!" But he knew that was impossible.

Yet Joanna hesitated.

"No," she said suddenly. "There must have been solid ground under the snow back there."

"Sure," Tim said. He got a flashlight, went back to the ditch, and made a brief examination.

"Yeah," he said unconvinced.

They were both silent on the way home. Tim had caught a glimpse of Joanna's grease-smearred gloves.

A small thing—yet it was the beginning. For Tim knew quite well that the car had been *lifted* out of the ditch, and a frail

woman of Joanna's build couldn't possibly have managed it.

But their doctor, Farleigh, an endocrinologist, talked to Tim a few weeks later.

"Tell Joanna to come in and see me," he said. "She hasn't been around for quite a while."

"She's healthy enough," Tim said.

Farleigh put his finger-tips together.

"Is she?"

"She's never sick."

"She may be. One of these days."

"There's nothing—"

"I want to keep an eye on her," Farleigh said. "I want to give her another complete check-up—x-rays and everything."

Tim took out a cigarette and lighted it very carefully.

"Okay. Let's have it. What's wrong?"

"I didn't say."

Tim looked at him. Farleigh scowled and took some x-ray plates from his drawer.

"Changes take place," he said. "The glands have a lot to do with it. I'm wondering if I haven't made a mistake."

"How?"

"If I called in a specialist. Joanna is—ah—it may be a form of hypothyroidism. Her skin, the exoderm, is thickening."

"I hadn't noticed."

"You wouldn't. Unless you tried to put a hypodermic needle through it. These x-rays—" He seemed oddly reluctant to show them to Tim.

"I gave her a gastro-intestinal series, and some iodine stains. One way to get a look at interior organs. It's peculiar. There's some sort of intestinal atrophy—the appendix has entirely disappeared, and the heart's much enlarged. Other things—"

"What?"

"Probably nothing," Farleigh said, putting the plates away again. "Just ask Joanna to run in and see me, will you?"

"Yeah," Tim said and left.

When he got home that night, the living-room was dark and empty. A low crooning noise came from the bedroom. He went quietly to the door and looked in. He couldn't see Joanna, but he saw something else, moving across the floor.

It might have been the Pekingese, except that it was even smaller than Tzu-Ling, and it *walked*, with the automatic precision of a clockwork figure.

The low crooning changed pitch. It became insistent. The tiny figure altered its movement. It attempted something grotesquely like a ballet position, an *entrechat* and an *arabesque*, which it couldn't hold. It fell with a soft thump on the carpet.

The crooning stopped.

"Tim?" Joanna said.

His middle cold and wet with sweat, Tim stepped into the bedroom and switched on the light. Joanna was sitting on the

bed, her knees drawn up. For a moment he thought of how lovely she was, her dark hair tumbling in ringlets, her face bright and interested like a girl of seventeen. Then he looked down.

A few years ago, a casual friend had given Joanna a doll, an expensive one, completely articulated and quite lifelike, for all its tiny size. It was a foot and a half high. Now it lay crumpled at Tim's feet.

He forced himself to stoop and pick it up. The wig felt like real hair under his fingers.

"Joanna," he said, and an empty, gray helplessness gripped him as he stared at his wife. For he knew what he had seen. It was impossible, but the moonlight had been sufficiently bright. The movements of the doll had not been those of a puppet or an automaton.

And she knew that he had seen. She drew her robe closer about her shoulders, shivering.

"Close the window, Tim, will you, please? It's cold."

He obeyed silently. By the time he faced her again, she had made her decision.

"Sit down, Tim," she said, patting the bed beside her. "Put the doll here. It won't move now. Not unless I... Tim, I don't know if you'll understand. If you *can* understand. But I hope you do."

"And I—rather hope that I'm insane," he said slowly. "What is it, Joanna? *For heaven's sake!*"

"Don't. It's nothing terrible. I've felt it coming for a long while now. I'm changing—that's all."

"Changing?"

"I was afraid at first. But now I—my mind works so much better. So does my body. I can feel things—sense things—and the doll was just an experiment. I can control inanimate objects from a distance. It takes practice.

"I did it with the car, that night in the snowstorm. Didn't you notice how white I was—after? It drained so much of my energy. But I could do it now without any difficulty at all."

"Joanna," he said, "I think you're insane."

She looked away.

"It's hard to begin at the beginning," she said reflectively.

"I've come so far since—since I noticed there *was* a change. And I'm so far beyond you now, Tim. I can see into your mind, and it's full of blocks and walls that won't let truth in."

"How did you make that doll move?"

Her dark eyes watched him for a moment. Then something cold and very strange seemed to lance into his brain, a whirling maelstrom like a twisting snow-flurry.

It was gone instantly. But now Joanna's voice seemed stronger and clearer. And he could understand, curiously, without questioning, what she was saying.

And—in essence—what she said was this—she was becoming a completely new type of human being. *Human* didn't describe it too accurately. As man evolved, through mutation, an enormous step beyond Neanderthaler, so the new race would come, similarly through mutation.

"But not in the conventional way, Tim. Not the way fiction writers have it. There won't be babies born with heads three feet in diameter and shriveled little bodies. Nothing like that.

"The higher an animal in the evolutionary scale, the longer is the period before maturity. It's natural selection. The super-race wouldn't be safe if it revealed its superiority too soon. It's protective camouflage.

"I think I'm the first mutation of this type, Tim. And not until lately—thirty-five years after my birth—have I begun to mature. Till now, I was adolescent—*merely human*."

There had been unsuccessful mutations in the past—freaks, abortions, failures. But more and more often now the mutations would occur.

"And we'll breed true. It may take many, many years before another super-human of my type appears. But I don't think I'll die for a long time. It's taken me thirty-five years to mature, so—"

She flung out her arms.

"And I'll change! *I'll change!* I'm seeing the world through new eyes now, the eyes of an adult! Up until now I've been like a child!"

Her eyes glowed.

"There will be more of us. I think I know how it happened in my case. You remember my father? He was connected with the Museum. Before my birth, he was out with that research expedition in Mexico, investigating the great meteoric crater there. My mother was with him.

"The radiations from that buried meteor brought about some rearrangement of genes in the germ-plasm, so the mutation was successful. And now there's so much new work in electronics. So much radiation being broadcast! I'm the only one of my kind now, but in a hundred years, or less—"

Tim looked at her. Yes, she had changed. He could see that now. She looked quite different, with an odd combination of new youthfulness and an underlying firm self-realization—a new maturity.

And there was more than that. As a child gains an intangible quality when he matures, so Joanna had gained something that was no more to be described than the blaze of a candle-flame shining through thin white porcelain.

Yet she was—Joanna. He knew, deep in his mind, how illogical her words were. But he could not disbelieve them. It was as though unseen fingers had reached out and moulded his thoughts into new patterns.

Tim reached for his wife's hand. That, at least, was familiar. The slim fingers lay warm, and relaxed against his palm. He tightened his grip.

There was nothing to say, against the overpowering certainty, the deep belief, that possessed him. She had made him believe, somehow.

"Joanna," he whispered. "You mustn't."

She shook her head.

"You mustn't," he repeated. "So it's happened once. Once in a million years it could happen like this—perhaps. But you can change it."

"I can't," she said. "A plant can't stop growing. It can't grow down again into a seed."

"What about us?"

"I don't know." Her voice was sombre. "I don't think we can go on this way—not for long."

"You know I—"

"And I love you, too, Tim. But I'm afraid. You see, I love Tzu-Ling in a different way. He's an inferior species. Later, after I've matured farther, you might be an inferior species to me too."

"You mean I am now," he said bitterly.

"No, Tim. You're not! But don't you see—I can't help this change. I can't stop it. And eventually we'll grow farther and farther apart, until—"

"Tzu-Ling. I see."

"And that would be horrible. For both of us. It might not be for me—then. It would depend on how much I'd changed by that time. But you understand, darling, don't you? It's better to make the break now, so we'll each have the right memories."

"No," he said, "I don't see that at all. There couldn't be any change that couldn't be compensated for."

"Human logic, based on emotion. You know it isn't true."

"You mustn't leave me, Joanna."

"I won't go tonight, anyway," she said, looking away. "I'm still too human. That makes me vulnerable. I think, in the end, *our* race will conquer and rule because we won't be vulnerable through emotions. We'll have emotions, yes, but they won't rule us. Logic will be the highest law."

Tim flung the doll into a corner, where it lay crumpled grotesquely. Tzu-Ling wakened at the noise and padded in from the next room to sniff at the doll. Satisfied, he lay down, head on his fluffy golden paws, and slept again.

But Tim did not sleep well that night. For a long while he lay awake, listening to Joanna's quiet breathing beside him, watching her profile in the faint moonlight. He was remembering a great deal. In the end he had come to no conclusion.

He slept at last.

And in the morning Joanna was gone.

For a year there was no trace of her. Tim put a detective agency on the track without result. He told no one the truth. They would not have believed. And he felt that if they *did* believe....

Sometimes he had a sickening picture of Joanna, outcast and alien, hunted like an animal by the humans who were no longer akin to her. He did hint a little to Dr. Farleigh, but the physician was so obviously skeptical that Tim didn't pursue the subject.

He waited, though, and followed the newspapers avidly. Somewhere, sometime, he felt, he would see Joanna's face looking up at him from a half-tone reproduction, or read her name in some news item.

When it came, Tim almost missed it. He had read and finished the weekly news-magazine, cast it aside and was smoking idly, listening to the radio. Joanna's face kept materializing in his thoughts. It wasn't quite the same—there was some subtle difference.

Then he knew. He picked up the magazine, found the photograph and examined it closely. It wasn't Joanna. It didn't look like her at all.

And yet, beyond the contour of cheek and jaw, beyond the outward difference, there was something of Joanna in the picture. It was impossible that the bony structure of the skull could have changed. And it was equally impossible that Joanna could have grown younger. This woman was scarcely twenty.

Quite young, Tim thought, for her to have such a remarkable discovery in the electronic-radiation field. Unless—

He took a plane to Berkeley, California, the next morning. He did not see Marion Parkhurst—that was the girl scientist's name. She had left for a brief vacation in the Rockies—a vacation from which she didn't return.

Marion Parkhurst dropped out of sight.

For two years after that nothing happened. There were a few new inventions patented and put on the market, all of them connected with radiations—an ingenious improvement on the magnetron, for example, and a gadget that brought a new concept into the television field. Little things, none of them important singly, but Tim kept a scrap-book.

Five years.

Seven years.

Ten years.

He had not forgotten. He would never forget, while he lived. Tim had loved Joanna very deeply, and sometimes, in his dreams, he would be St. George, rescuing Joanna from a dragon that wore the terrible shape of the future.

Sometimes he saw that future in his dreams—a world peopled by men and women like gods, alien and inhuman as gods. They were giants and crushed humans like ants beneath their titan feet.

But giants could be killed, Tim knew. The mutation was more deadly, for it masqueraded as human. It had been ten years since Joanna's disappearance, and during that decade she had not been unmasked. She had been perfectly free to do—what?

Fifteen years.

Seventeen.

And then, one warm summer night in Central Park, he saw her again. Some fantastic radiation from her mind must have impinged on his. For she wasn't Joanna any more. She didn't look like Joanna, or walk like Joanna.

After he had stopped her, Tim had a sick feeling that he must be mistaken. But he gripped her arms and swung her about into the glare of an overhead light. She could have wrenched free. Tim was sixty-two and older than his years.

She stood there, waiting, watching him while he searched her face. He could have seen more clearly with his glasses, but he felt embarrassed about putting them on. Not that his age didn't show clearly in his face, but—

She was between twenty and twenty-five, he guessed, and she bore not the slightest resemblance to Joanna. He didn't look for anything physical, though. He searched for that burning, ardent spark, more than human, that blazed within her like incandescent flame.

It was not there.

So he had been wrong. It was another false hope, after so many others. Tim's shoulders slumped. He felt very weary and very old. He muttered something—an apology—and turned away. Then a slim hand touched his arm.

"Tim," she said.

He looked at her, incredulous. It wasn't possible. It couldn't be happening after seventeen years. This girl didn't have the—the flame.

She read his thought. She leaned toward him, and that tremendous wave of vitality, of godlike fire, pulsed out from her. Tim was shaken by its strength.

"Joanna," he said. "You can't be—"

"I learned," she said very softly. "I learned to control the Power. It was too dangerous. Men might have learned to recognize me by it."

He couldn't say anything. He fumbled for her hand, but she drew away.

"Don't touch me, Tim," she said. "It's a mistake. I shouldn't have—but when I read your mind and saw all that lost, lonely unhappiness—I couldn't let you go without—"

"I'll never let you go now," he said.

"You've forgotten. I've changed—more than you realize now."

"It's you who've forgotten. Look." He swept out an arm, indicating the tremendous lighted towers of New York that stood like cyclopean guardians ringing the Park.

This had been their favorite view when they were first married. On such warm summer evenings as this they had walked together along the dim paths, listening to the distant music of the carousel, laughing at nothing, talking.

He dropped his hand quickly. The light had mercilessly revealed the brown-splotched skin, the blue veins of age.

"Do you think age matters?" Joanna asked. "I could make you young again, Tim. But you'd still be human. And I'm not anymore."

"You could do that?"

"Yes. My power has grown. But it's a question of different species, not of age."

"Joanna," he said, "what do you want? What are you trying to do?"

"Now?" She smiled a little crookedly. "I'm just waiting. For many years I did electronic research, trying to cause an artificial mutation that would duplicate my own.

"But I failed. I'm afraid there's nobody else like me on earth, Tim, and perhaps there never will be. I'll live for a long time—a thousand years or more—and I'll be very lonely. I'm lonely now.

"My heritage—a new race—sustained me for years, but I've waited until I know how hopeless my wait may be. I'm the first of the new race, and I may be the last."

"Give it up," he said. "You've wasted years."

"I have so many. Too many."

"Come back to me, Joanna. Forget all—"

For an instant he thought she was on the verge of yielding. But something stirred in the bushes near them. A shaggy, unkempt form loomed in the light, black against the green. Tim saw Joanna turn her head. He felt that tremendous wave of power beat out, and he was suddenly blind and giddy.

Then he saw that the dark figure lay on the ground, motionless. His throat dry, he knelt to feel for heart-beat. There was none.

"Joanna," he said. "It was just a tramp. Drunk. You killed him?"

"He heard us. I had to. In all the world, you're the only man who knows, the only man I can trust completely."

"But he was drunk! He wouldn't have remembered. If he had, nobody would have believed him."

"I can take no chances," she said. "I'm one woman against a whole world now. Forget him. His life was worthless."

What she read on Tim's face made her catch her breath in a little sob. She moved a few steps away into the shadow.

"I'm going now, Tim. But if you want to see me, I'm singing at the Met tonight."

That was all. She was gone. Tim shuddered. The night was not cold, but his blood was thin with age. And there was that horribly silent figure at his feet.

He walked south. There was nothing he could do for the tramp now. Death had struck too suddenly, too incredibly. As it might strike anywhere, anytime—with Joanna as the Dark Angel.

He knew now that she was inhuman as an angel, perhaps as amoral. The ties that had bound her to humanity were slipping. Tim was perhaps the last of those ties. When that was cut—

There would be nothing to hold her back from fulfilling the least of her desires. She would not die for a thousand years or more. Her powers were super-human. Had she achieved full maturity yet?

If not, the future might hold sheer horror.

Tim felt his sanity slipping. He stopped at the nearest bar and ordered whisky. He kept on drinking.

He saw a world helpless, writhing in agony, beneath the rule of a woman who was more than autocrat. Lilith. Juno. A goddess—and, perhaps, mother of a race of gods and goddesses. For that was her destiny—to be mother to the new race that would crush and eradicate humanity.

He was very drunk by eight o'clock. He went home by taxi, got a flat little automatic out of a bureau drawer, and went to the Met. He bought a ticket at an exorbitant sum from a scalper and went into the foyer, ready.

His brain felt on fire.

He recognized Joanna instantly when she appeared. She was Marguerite, and it seemed black, Satanic irony to him that she should represent the spirit of purity, resisting the lures of Faust and his evil genius. He waited.

And then Tim Hathaway was ready. A gaunt, white-haired figure stood up from an orchestra seat and leveled an automatic at Marguerite's white-gowned figure. He was seen instantly. Hands reached for him. Voices rose in excited clamor.

He couldn't miss. He squeezed the trigger. The bullet would go through her heart.

It would go through—Joanna's heart.

Yes—it was easy. The tumult, the radiations from a thousand minds beating furiously through the theatre, had confused her. She had no chance to use her inhuman power. She wasn't fully mature yet, and Tim could have killed her then.

But he didn't.

At the last moment, he jerked up the automatic. The bullet tore through painted canvas. With a hoarse, sobbing cry, Tim plunged into the heart of the mob that was thronging around him, and lost himself in that human maelstrom.

He slipped through an exit, unobserved. The mob was yelling so loudly that he didn't hear his name called, again and again, by the white-gowned Marguerite on the stage.

"Tim! Come back! You were right, darling! *Tim, come back to me!*"

Tim Hathaway put his whiskey glass on the table. His bleared eyes stared into mine. He was less drunk than he had been when he began his story.

"She did that?" he whispered. "After I—"

"Yes," I said.

"You were there?"

"I was there."

The juke-box's honky-tonk music blared out again. The grotesque shadows of dancing couples moved jerkily on the wall.

Hathaway stood up.

"Thanks," he said, moistening his lips. "Thanks for coming after me ... telling me...."

"I had a reason," I said. "Where are you going?"

"Back to her," he said. "Back to my wife."

The booth was secluded. No one could see us. I stood up too—and looked at Hathaway. I used the Power.

He died instantly, without pain. It was merciful.

I waited till his body had slumped down out of sight. I was grateful to him. Therefore—I killed him.

But he had given me the answer for which I had been searching for many years. Even an inferior race can be useful. I put Hathaway out of my mind and went toward the door. I was going to Joanna, the future mother of my children, of the new race that would rule the earth.

[The end of *The Dark Angel* by Henry Kuttner]