

An excerpt from

THE SECRET SERVICE

by Wendy Walker

... *H*e was lifted up—laid down—raised once more—tied to a stake—his roots touched the grainy moisture of loose nutrient soil. Water, heady as wine, rose and spread through him in a blissful intoxication. He awakened to the forgotten experience of light, air, earth, time, locale, and the moral flavor of other men, though the senses through which he perceived these phenomena were now wholly altered.

Unable either to see or hear, he roused his consciousness to concentration upon a world silent and utterly void of form. Sensitive to the extension of space around him, he seemed to read the variations in temperature and humidity, which receded into the distance as a layering of opacities; and though unable to see in the customary sense of the word, being nevertheless sensitive to light he found himself translating into the imagination of areas these fluctuations in the atmosphere which bore the emotional connotations of what, in a previous life, he would have called colors. Dense and humid areas recalled the peaceful, pathetic aura of blue, while a hot and arid gust inevitably aroused the concomitant vengeful aura of maroon. This world that he could not view was nevertheless vividly apparent to him as a mysterious skyscape of blurred presences and and scored erasures; he remembered the evocative jumble on the schoolroom slate at the end of a long day, its residue of action no longer comprehensible, and it seemed to him that now he must interpret the Duc's garden as though it were some alien, obliterated outline of ideas which he was presumed to have mastered, and upon which he soon would be examined, but with which he was entirely unacquainted. He brooded alertly upon these cirrus veils and wisps whose exact position in relation to himself he seemed to feel so precisely, and remarked to himself on the forms that a definite presence, human or not, might unquestionably take, which he had never suspected before the experience of transformation had been his.

As his roots awakened to the surrounding soil, and his myriad pores opened to the mordant, wormy, mineral flavor of the earth-draught which, as he now realized, he had been longing for hungrily, he felt his thin subterranean tendrils reaching out like peculiarly sensitive fingers that also can taste, or digital tongues, and all the subtle familiar flavors of burrowing creatures, and annelida, and the vagrant dilutions of zinc, magnesium, and copper, swam into his senses as though he had never been absent from the perennial welcoming earth. At the same time a meticulous balance and suspension of tensions in his stem, branches, and leaves informed him, now being nourished, how the processes of growth within his body were advancing; and this fugue of operations intercalated with the ponderous stress upon one branch that at first caused him fear until, at a lift and rebound, he understood the momentary lighting of a bird, and the dense uniform sequence of gentle shocks over all his leaves that betokened a spattering of rain, and the strange aggressive and dispassionate twisting of his entire frame, as the sun passed across the sky, which experience of torque he felt as inexorably as a flame before a window open to the chilly night.

The boundaries of himself seemed as definite as they'd been when he was a man, but the sensation of physical identity was entirely different. In his human body Rutherford had sensed all his physical processes, with the exception of eating, evacuation, and breathing, to be essentially circular ones; his blood coursed round and round, driven on by the pumping mechanism at the hub of his radiant frame, and if pain or pleasure invaded that frame through a wounded limb or the susceptible eye, it quickly shared its discomfort or exhilaration with every other region of his body, through a sequence of telegraphed signals too swift to be felt as anything other than a rushing, curving thrill. Not so did he sense his bodily existence now; the water he sucked through his delicate grasping roots shot upwards with so blind and forthright an intention, surging through every ramifying sprig off the main avenue of his trunk toward the waiting sky, that he felt at once like some great exfoliating thoroughfare that could be traveled in only one direction, and all the swimming droplets that he admitted were like so many thousands of lemmings coursing irresistibly to the sea. As the water strove up and outwards through every branch, his consciousness seemed to divide into as many compartments as there were veins of travel, and as the flood stretched out into those shallow plains, his leaves, he reflected upon this new physical identity in as many subtle variations on that proposition as he had wide, flat, pointed surfaces, each in itself capable of reflection and absorbing its proportional amount of sun. As the day wore on, the unified fragmentation of his thought, which refracted the meaning of one brooding phenomenon, assumed a more dual, divisive character. The leaves on one side obsessed over the grim, unaccountable singleness of the directional forces within his body, extrapolating pessimistic allegories on the instinct of survival, and constructing arguments to explain and justify its manifest vulgarity; the remaining leaves, on his opposite side, dilated in ecstatic thought on the unity of scientific truth and the unanalyzed insights accorded religious mystics, and swam in an illuminated hope that all the water that rose so unceasingly from the earth established a symbol of the natural heavenward trend of all earthly things, whose existence in this, his own body, must be certain assurance of salvation. Rutherford, in some dim consciousness that preserved itself on the hinterland of these hectic confabulations, was at a loss to explain two moods so ill-fitted to his character, a sophisticated theological zealotry, and an equally irrational materialistic pessimism. Then the possibility struck him that the very atmosphere in which he had been planted had undergone some sort of motionless but radical division, which, being utterly natural, had prompted no alarm and caused him no harm. When he roused himself to a variation in temperature entirely concomitant to the severe division of his mood, he realized that he must be intersected by a shadow-line, cast by some unknown object across the way.

from Chapter 5, pages 145-8