THE STAR

A star had fallen beyond the horizon, in Canada perhaps. (He had an aunt in Canada.) The second was nearer, just beyond the iron works, so he was not surprised when the third fell into the backyard. A flash of gold light lit the walls of the enclosing tenements and he heard a low musical chord. The light turned deep red and went out, and he knew that somewhere below a star was cooling in the night air. Turning from the window he saw that no-one else had noticed. At the table his father, thoughtfully frowning, filled in a football coupon, his mother continued ironing under the pulley with its row of underwear. He said in a small voice, "A'm gawn out."
His mother said, "See you're no' long then."
He slipped through the lobby and onto the stairhead, banging the door after him.

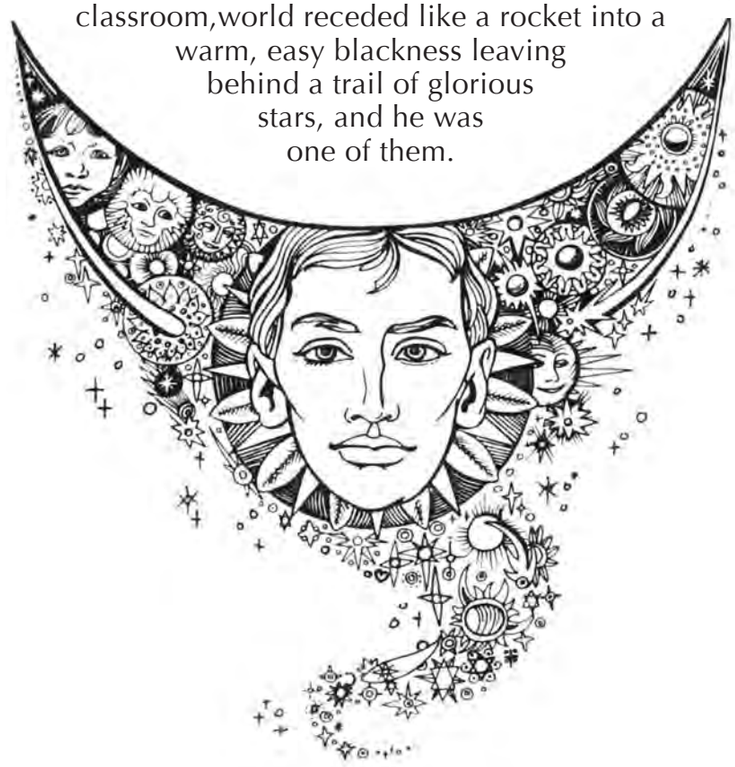
The stairs were cold and coldly lit at each landing by a weak electric bulb. He hurried down three flights to the black silent yard and began hunting backward and forward, combing with his fingers the lank grass round the base of the clothes-pole. He found it in the midden on a decayed cabbage leaf. It was smooth and round, the size of a glass marble, and it shone with a light which made it seem to rest on a precious bit of green and yellow velvet. He picked it up. It was warm and filled his cupped palm with a ruby glow. He put it in his pocket and went back upstairs.

That night in bed he had a closer look. He slept with his brother who was not easily wakened. Wriggling

carefully far down under the sheets, he opened his palm and gazed. The star shone white and blue, making the space around him like a cave in an iceberg. He brought it close to his eye. In its depth was the pattern of a snow-flake, the grandest thing he had ever seen. He looked through the flake's crystal lattice into an ocean of glittering blue-black waves under a sky full of huge galaxies. He heard a remote lulling sound like the sound in a sea-shell, and fell asleep with the star safely clenched in his hand.

He enjoyed it for nearly two weeks, gazing at it each night below the sheets, sometimes seeing the snow-flake, sometimes a flower, jewel, moon or landscape. At first he kept it hidden during the day but soon took to carrying it about with him; the smooth rounded gentle warmth in his pocket gave comfort when he felt insulted or neglected.

At school one afternoon he decided to take a quick look. He was at the back of the classroom in a desk by himself. The teacher was among the boys at the front row and all heads were bowed over books. Quickly he brought out the star and looked. It contained an aloof eye with a cool green pupil which dimmed and trembled as if seen through water.
"What have you there, Cameron?"
He shuddered and shut his hand.
"Marbles are for the playground, not the classroom. You'd better give it to me."
"I cannae, sir."
"I don't tolerate disobedience, Cameron. Give me that thing."
The boy saw the teacher's face above him, the mouth opening and shutting under a clipped moustache. Suddenly he knew what to do and put the star in his mouth and swallowed. As the warmth sank toward his heart he felt relaxed and at ease. The teacher's face moved into the distance. Teacher, classroom,world receded like a rocket into a warm, easy blackness leaving behind a trail of glorious stars, and he was one of them.



THE SPREAD OF IAN NICOL

One day Ian Nicol, a riveter by trade, started to split in two down the middle. The process began as a bald patch on the back of his head. For a week he kept smearing it with hair restorer, yet it grew bigger, and the surface became curiously puckered and so unpleasant to look upon that at last he went to his doctor. "What is it?" he asked.
"I don't know," said the doctor, "but it looks like a face, ha, ha! How do you feel these days?"
"Fine. Sometimes I get a stabbing pain in my chest and stomach but only in the morning."
"Eating well?"
"Enough for two men."
The doctor thumped him all over with a stethoscope and said, "I'm going to have you X-rayed. And I may need to call in a specialist."

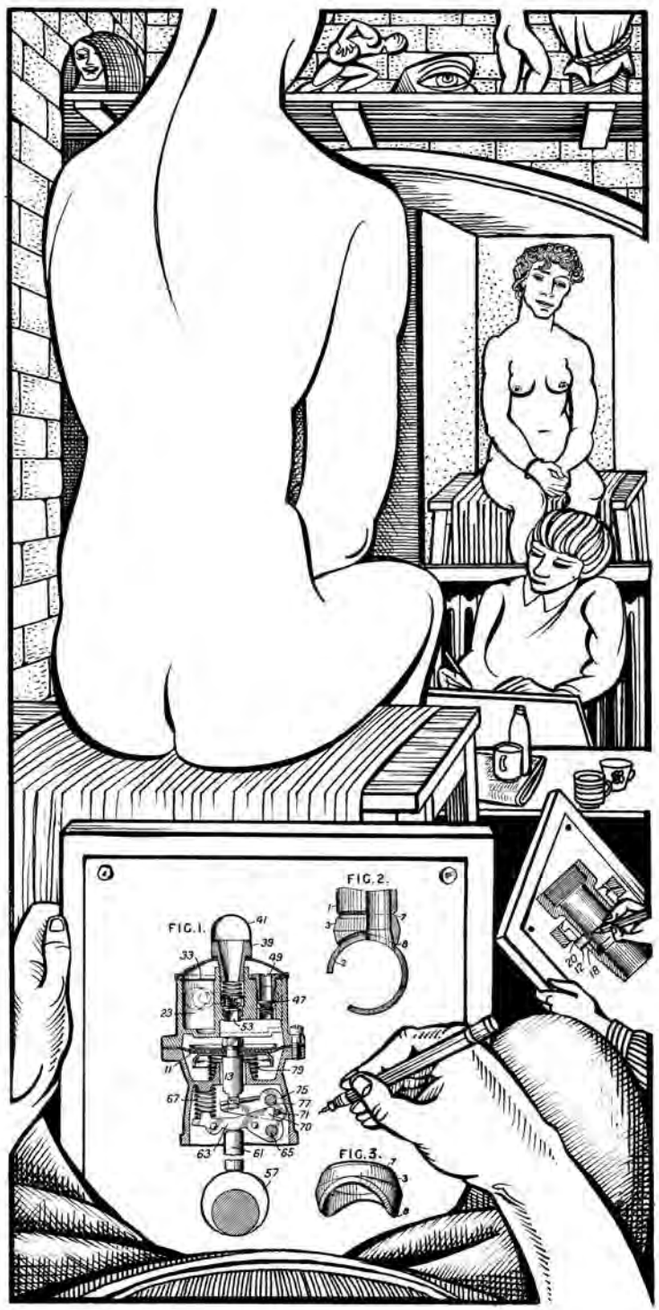
Over the next three weeks the bald patch grew bigger still and the suggestion of a face more clearly marked on it. Ian visited his doctor and found a specialist in the consulting room, examining X-ray plates against the light. "No doubt about it, Nicol," said the specialist, "you are splitting in two down the middle."
Ian considered this.
"That's not usual, is it?" he asked.
"Oh, it happens more than you would suppose. Among bacteria and viruses it's very common, though it's certainly less frequent among riveters. I suggest you go into hospital where the process can complete itself without annoyance for your wife or embarrassment to yourself. Think it over."

Ian thought it over and went into hospital where he was put into a small ward and given a nurse to attend him, for the specialist was interested in the case. As the division proceeded more specialists were called in to see what was happening. At first Ian ate and drank with a greed that appalled those who saw it. After consuming three times his normal bulk for three days on end he fell into a coma which lasted till the split was complete. Gradually the lobes of his brain separated and a bone shutter formed between them. The face on the back of his head grew eyelashes and a jaw. What seemed at first a cancer of the heart became another heart. Convulsively the spine doubled itself. In a puzzled way the specialists charted the stages of the process and discussed the cause. A German consultant said that life was freeing itself from the vicissitudes of sexual reproduction. A psychiatrist said it was a form of schizophrenia, a psycho-analyst that it was an ordinary twinning process which had been delayed by a severe case of prenatal sibling rivalry. When the split was complete, two thin Ian Nicols lay together on the bed.

The resentment each felt for the other had not been foreseen or guarded against. In bed the original Ian Nicol could be recognized by his position (he lay on the right of the bed), but as soon as both men were strong enough to walk each claimed ownership of

birth certificate, union card, clothes, wife and National Insurance benefit. One day in the hospital grounds they started fighting. They were evenly matched and there are conflicting opinions about who won. On leaving hospital they took legal action against each other for theft of identity. The case was resolved by a medical examination which showed that one of them had no navel.

The second Ian Nicol changed his name by deed poll and is now called Macbeth. Sometimes he and Ian Nicol write to each other. The latest news is that each has a bald patch on the back of his head.



THE CAUSE OF RECENT CHANGES

The painting departments of modern art schools are full of discontented people. One day Mildred said to me, “I’m sick of wasting time. We start work at ten and tire after half an hour and the boys throw paper pellets at each other and the girls stand round the radiators talking. Then we get bored and go to the refectory and drink coffee and we aren’t enjoying ourselves, but what else can we do? I’m tired of it. I want to do something vigorous and constructive.”
I said, “Dig a tunnel.”
“What do you mean?”
“Instead of drinking coffee when you feel bored, go down to the basement and dig an escape tunnel.”
“But if I wanted to escape I could walk through the front door and not come back.”
“You can’t escape that way. The education department would stop your bursary and you would have to work for a living.”
“But where would I be escaping to?”
“That isn’t important. To travel hopefully is better than to arrive.”

My suggestion was not meant seriously but was taken seriously. In the seldom-visited sub-basement a flagstone was replace by a disguise trap-door. Under this a room was dug into the school’s foundation and here the tunnel began. In forty minute shifts boxes of waste were winched up and the waste put in small sacks easily smuggled out under students’ clothing. The school was built on a bank of igneous quartz so there was no danger of walls caving in, no need of pit-props. Digging was eased by a chemical solvent applied to rock faces with a hand spray, making

them soft as cheese. This was invented by industrial design students who despised the painters digging the tunnel but supported it as a technical challenge.

The tunnel did not fail after a few months like the attempt to start an art school debating society, magazine, choir and outing to Linlithgow. Enthusiasm for it actually increased. The Students Representative Society was packed with members of the tunnel committee who organized dances to pay for the installation of more powerful winches. We all became more tense, jumping at small sounds, laughing loudly at feeble jokes, quarrelling with small provocation. Did some fear the tunnel would open a volcanic vent? Yet the diggers noticed no increase of temperature. Sometimes I wondered how the project remained free from interference. An engineering venture supported by several hundred people can hardly be called a secret. It was natural for those outside the school to regard rumours as fantastic inventions, but why did none of the teachers interfere? Only a minority were active supporters of the project; two were being bribed to remain silent. I am sure the director and deputy director did not know, but what about the rest who knew and said nothing? Perhaps they also regarded the tunnel as a possible means of escape. One day work on the tunnel stopped. The first shift going to work in the morning coffee-break discovered that the basement entrance was locked. There were several tunnel entrances now but all were found to be locked, and since the tunnel committee had vanished it was assumed they were inside. This caused a deal of speculation.

I have always kept clear of mass movements, so on meeting the president of the committee in a lonely upper corridor one evening, I said, "Hullo, Mildred," and would have passed on, but she gripped my arm and said, "Come with me."
She led me a few yards to the open door of what I had thought was a disused service lift. She said, "You'd better sit on the floor," and closed the gates behind us and pulled a lever. The lift fell like a stone with a noise so high-pitched that it was sometimes inaudible. After fifteen minutes it decelerated in violent jerks, then stopped. Mildred opened the gates and we stepped out.

In spite of myself I was impressed by what I saw. We stood in a corridor with an arched ceiling, asphalt floor and walls of white tile. It swept left and right in a curve that prevented seeing more than a mile in each direction. "Very good," I said, "very good indeed. How did you manage it? The fluorescent lighting alone must have cost a fortune."
Mildred said gloomily, "We didn't make this place. We only reached it."
At that moment an elderly man passed us on a bicycle. He wore a peaked cap, an armband with some kind of badge on it and was otherwise naked, for the air was warm. As he passed he raised a hand in a friendly gesture. I said, "Who was that?"
"Some kind of official. There aren't many of them on this level."
"How many levels are there?"
"Three. This one has dormitories and canteens for the staff, and underneath are the offices of the administration, and under that is the engine."
"What engine?"
"The one that drives us round the sun."
"But gravity drives the world round the sun."
"Has anyone ever told you what gravity is and how it operates?"
I realized nobody ever had. Mildred said, "Gravity is nothing but a word top-level scientists use to hide their ignorance."
I asked her how the engine was powered. She said,
"Steam."
"Not nuclear fission?"
"No, the industrial design boys are quite certain it's a steam engine of the most primitive sort imaginable. They're

down there measuring and sketching with the rest of the committee. We'll show you a picture in a day or two."
"Does nobody ask what right you have to go poking about inside this thing?"
"No. It's like all big organizations. The staff are so numerous that you can go where you like if you look confident enough."

I had to meet a friend in half an hour so we got into the lift and started back up. I said, "Well, Mildred, it's interesting of course, but I don't know why you brought me to see it." She said, "I'm worried. The others keep laughing at the machinery and discussing how to alter it. They think they can improve the climate by taking us nearer the sun. I'm afraid we're doing wrong."
"Of course you're doing wrong! You're supposed to be studying art, not planetary motion. I would never have suggested the project if I'd thought you would take it to this length."
She let me out on the ground floor saying, "We can't turn back now."
I suppose she redescended for I never saw her again.

That night I was wakened by an explosion and my bed falling heavily to the ceiling. The sun, which had just set, came up again. The city was inundated by sea. We survivors crouched a long time among ruins threatened by earthquakes, avalanches and whirlwinds. All clocks were working at different speeds and the sun, after reaching the height of noon, stayed there. At length the elements calmed and we examined the new situation. It is clear that the planet has broken into several bits. Our bit is not revolving. To enjoy starlight and darkness, to get a good night's sleep, we have to walk to the other side of our new world, a journey of several miles, with an equally long journey back when we want daylight.