

THE IRON MAN

Ted Hughes

Chapter 3

What's to be Done With the Iron Man?

So the Spring came round the following year, leaves unfurled from the buds, daffodils spread up from the soil, and everywhere the grass shook new green points. The round hill over the Iron Man was covered with new grass. Before the end of the summer, sheep were grazing on the fine grass on the lovely hillock. People who had never heard of the Iron Man saw the green hill as they drove past on their way to the sea, and they said: "What a lovely hill! What a perfect place for a picnic!"

So people began to picnic on top of the hill. Soon, quite a path was worn up there, by people climbing to eat their sandwiches and take snaps of each other.

One day, a father, a mother, a little boy and a little girl stopped their car and climbed the hill for a picnic. They had never heard of the Iron Man and they thought the hill had been there for ever.

They spread a tablecloth on the grass. They set down the plate of sandwiches, a big pie, a roasted chicken, a bottle of milk, a bowl of tomatoes, a bagful of boiled eggs, a dish of butter and a loaf of bread, with cheese and salt and cups. The father got his stove going to boil some water for tea, and they all lay back on rugs munching food and waiting for the kettle to boil, under the blue sky.

Suddenly the father said: "That's funny!"

"What is?" asked the mother.

"I felt the ground shake," the father said. "Here, right beneath us."

"Probably an earthquake in Japan," said the mother.

"An earthquake in Japan?" cried the little boy. "How could that be?"

So the father began to explain how an earthquake in a far distant country, that shakes down buildings and empties lakes, sends a jolt right around the earth. People far away in other countries feel it as nothing more than a slight trembling of the ground. An earthquake that knocks a city flat in South America, might do no more than shake a picture off a wall in Poland. But as the father was talking, the mother gave a little gasp, then a yelp.

"The chicken!" she cried. "The cheese! The tomatoes!"

Everybody sat up. The tablecloth was sagging in the middle. As they watched the sag got deeper and all the food fell into it, dragging the tablecloth right down into

the ground. The ground underneath was splitting and the tablecloth, as they watched, slowly folded and disappeared into the crack, and they were left staring at a jagged black crack in the ground. The crack grew, it widened, it lengthened, it ran between them. The mother and the girl were on one side and the father and the boy were on the other side. The little stove toppled into the growing crack with a clatter and the kettle disappeared.

They could not believe their eyes. They stared at the widening crack. Then, as they watched, an enormous iron hand came up through the crack, groping around in the air, feeling over the grass on either side of the crack. It nearly touched the little boy, and he rolled over backwards. The mother screamed. "Run to the car," – shouted the father. They all ran. They jumped into the car. They drove. They did not look back.

So they did not see the great iron head, square like a bedroom, with red glaring headlamp eyes, and with the tablecloth, still with the chicken and the cheese, draped across the top of it, rising out of the top of the hillock, as the Iron Man freed himself from the pit.

When the farmers realized that the Iron Man had freed himself they groaned.

What could they do now? They decided to call the Army, who could pound him to bits with anti-tank guns. But Hogarth had another idea. At first, the farmers would not hear of it, least of all his own father. But at last they agreed. Yes, they would give Hogarth's idea a trial. And if it failed, they would call in the Army.

After spending a night and a day eating all the barbed wire for miles around, as well as hinges he tore off gates and the tin cans he found in ditches, and three new tractors and two cars and a lorry, the Iron Man was resting in a clump of elm trees. There he stood, leaning among the huge branches, almost hidden by the dense leaves, his eyes glowing a soft blue.

The farmers came near, along a lane, in cars so that they could make a quick getaway in things went wrong. They stopped fifty yards from the clump of elm trees. He really was a monster. This was the first time most of them had had a good look at him. His chest was as big as a cattle truck. His arms were like cranes, and he was getting rusty, probably from eating all the old barbed wire.

Now Hogarth walked up towards the Iron Man.

"Hello," he shouted, and stopped. "Hello, Mr Iron Man."

The Iron Man made no move. His eyes did not change.

Then Hogarth picked up a rusty old horseshoe, and knocked it against a stone:

Clonk, Clonk, Clonk!

At once, the Iron Man's eyes turned darker blue. Then purple. Then red. And finally, white, like a car headlamps. It was the only sign he gave of having heard.

"Mr Iron Man," shouted Hogarth. "We've got all the iron you want, all the food you want, and you can have it for nothing, if only you'll stop eating up the farms."

The Iron Man stood up straight. Slowly he turned, till he was looking directly at Hogarth.

"We're sorry we trapped you and buried you," shouted the little boy. "We promise we'll not deceive you again. Follow us and you can have all the metal you want. Brass too. Aluminium too. And lots of old chrome. Follow us."

The Iron Man pushed aside the boughs and came into the lane. Hogarth joined the farmers. Slowly they drove back down the lane, and slowly, with all his cogs humming, the Iron Man stepped after them.

They led through the villages. Half the people came out to stare, half ran to shut themselves inside bedrooms and kitchens. Nobody could believe their eyes when they saw the Iron Man marching behind the farmers.

At last they came to the town, and there was a great scrap-metal yard.

Everything was there, old cars by the hundred, old trucks, old railway engines, old stoves, old refrigerators, old springs, bedsteads, bicycles, girders, gates, pans – all the scrap iron of the region was piled up there, rusting away.

"There," cried Hogarth. "Eat all you can."

The Iron Man gazed, and his eyes turned red. He kneeled down in the yard, he stretched out on one elbow. He picked up a greasy black stove and chewed it like a toffee. There were delicious crumbs of chrome on it. He followed that with a doubledecker bedstead and the brass knobs made his eyes crackle with joy. Never before had the Iron Man eaten such delicacies. As he lay there, a big truck turned into the yard and unloaded a pile of rusty chain. The Iron Man lifted a handful and let it dangle into his mouth – better than any spaghetti.

So there they left him. It was an Iron Man's heaven. The farmers went back to their farms. Hogarth visited the Iron Man every few days. Now the Iron Man's eyes were constantly a happy blue. He was no longer rusty. His body gleamed blue, like a new gun barrel. And he ate, ate, ate, ate – endlessly.