

THE IRON MAN

by Ted Hughes

The Return of the Iron Man

One evening a farmer's son, a boy called Hogarth, was fishing in a stream that ran down to the sea. It was growing too dark to fish, his hook kept getting caught in weeds and bushes. So he stopped fishing and

came up from the stream and stood listening to the owls in the wood further up the valley, and to the sea behind him. Hush, said the sea. And again, Hush. Hush. Hush.

Suddenly he felt a strange feeling. He felt he was being watched. He felt afraid. He turned and looked up the steep field to the top of the high cliff. Behind that skyline was the sheer rocky cliff and the sea. And on that skyline, just above the edge of it, in the dusk, were two green lights. What were

two green lights doing at the top of the cliff?

Then, as Hogarth watched, a huge dark figure climbed up over the cliff-top. The two lights rose into the sky. They were the giant figure's eyes. A giant black figure, taller than a house, black and towering in the twilight, with green headlamp eyes. The Iron Man! There he stood on the cliff-top, looking inland. Hogarth began to run. He ran and ran. Home. Home. The Iron Man had come back.

So he got home at last and gasping for breath he told his dad. An Iron Man! An Iron Man! A giant!

His father frowned. His mother grew pale. His little sister began to cry.

His father took down his double-barrelled gun. He believed his son. He went out. He locked the door. He got in his car. He drove to the next farm.

But that farmer laughed. He was a fat, red man, with a fat, red-mouthed laugh. When he stopped laughing,

his eyes were red too. An Iron Man? Nonsense, he said.

So Hogarth's father got back in his car. Now it was dark and it had begun to rain. He drove to the next farm.

That farmer frowned. He believed. Tomorrow, he said, we must see what he is, this iron man. His feet will have left tracks in the earth.

So Hogarth's father again got back into his car. But as he turned the car in the yard, he saw a strange thing in the headlamps. Half a tractor lay there,

just half, chopped clean off, the other half missing. He got out of his car and the other farmer came to look too. The tractor had been bitten off – there were big teeth-marks in the steel.

No explanation! The two men looked at each other. They were puzzled and afraid. What could have bitten the tractor in two? There, in the yard, in the rain, in the night, while they had been talking inside the house.

The farmer ran in and bolted his door.

Hogarth's father jumped into his car and drove off into the night and the rain as fast as he could, homeward.

The rain poured down. Hogarth's father drove hard. The headlights lit up the road and bushes.

Suddenly – two headlamps in a tall treetop at the roadside ahead. Headlamps in a treetop? How?

Hogarth's father slowed, peering up to see what the lights might be, up there in the treetop.

As he slowed, a giant iron foot came down in the middle of the road, a foot as big as a single bed. And the headlamps came down closer. And a giant hand reached down towards the windshield.

The Iron Man!

Hogarth's father put on speed, he aimed his car at the foot.

Crash! He knocked the foot out of the way.

He drove on, faster and faster. And behind him, on the road, a clanging



clattering boom went up, as if an iron skyscraper had collapsed. The iron giant, with his foot knocked from under him, had toppled over.

And so Hogarth's father got home safely.

BUT

Next morning all the farmers were shouting with anger. Where were their tractors? Their earth-diggers? Their ploughs? Their harrows? From every farm in the region, all the steel and iron farm machinery had gone.

Where to? Who had stolen it all?

There was a clue. Here and there lay half a wheel, or half an axle, or half a mudguard, carved with giant toothmarks where it had been bitten off. How had it been bitten off? Steel bitten off?

What had happened?

There was another clue.

From farm to farm, over the soft soil of the fields, went giant footprints, each one the size of a single bed.

The farmers, in a frightened, silent,

amazed crowd, followed the footprints.
And at every farm the footprints
visited, all the metal machinery had
disappeared.

Finally, the footprints led back
up to the top of the cliff, where the
little boy had seen the Iron Man
appear the night before, when he
was fishing. The footprints led right
to the cliff-top.

And all the way down the cliff were
torn marks on the rocks, where a huge
iron body had slid down. Below, the tide

was in. The grey, empty, moving tide.
The Iron Man had gone back into
the sea.

SO

The furious farmers began to
shout. The Iron Man had stolen all
their machinery. Had he eaten it?
Anyway, he had taken it. It had gone.
So what if he came again? What would
he take next time? Cows? Houses?
People?

They would have to do something.
They couldn't call in the police

or the Army, because nobody would believe them about this Iron Monster. They would have to do something for themselves.

So, what did they do?

At the bottom of the hill, below where the Iron Man had come over the high cliff, they dug a deep, enormous hole. A hole wider than a house, and as deep as three trees one on top of the other. It was a colossal hole. A stupendous hole! And the sides of it were sheer as walls.

They pushed all the earth off to one side.

They covered the hole with branches and the branches they covered with straw and the straw with soil, so when they finished the hole looked like a freshly-ploughed field.

Now, on the side of the hole opposite the slope up to the top of the cliff, they put an old rusty lorry. That was the bait. Now they reckoned the Iron Man would come over the top of the cliff out of the sea, and he'd see

the old lorry which was painted red, and he'd come down to get it to chew it up and eat it. But on his way to the lorry he'd be crossing the hole, and the moment he stepped with his great weight on to that soil held up only with straw and branches, he would crash through into the hole and would never get out. They'd find him there in the hole. Then they'd bring the few bull-dozers and earth-movers that he hadn't already eaten, and they'd push the pile of earth in on top of him, and

bury him for ever in the hole. They were certain now that they'd get him.

Next morning, in great excitement, all the farmers gathered together to go along to examine their trap. They came carefully closer, expecting to see his hands tearing at the edge of the pit. They came carefully closer.

The red lorry stood just as they had left it. The soil lay just as they had left it, undisturbed. Everything was just as they had left it. The Iron Man had not come.

Nor did he come that day.

Next morning, all the farmers came again. Still, everything lay just as they had left it.

And so it went on, day after day. Still the Iron Man never came.

Now the farmers began to wonder if he would ever come again. They began to wonder if he had ever come at all. They began to make up explanations of what had happened to their machinery. Nobody likes to believe in an Iron Monster that eats

tractors and cars.

Soon, the farmer who owned the red lorry they were using as bait decided that he needed it, and he took it away. So there lay the beautiful deep trap, without any bait. Grass began to grow on the loose soil.

The farmers talked of filling the hole in. After all, you can't leave a giant pit like that, somebody might fall in. Some stranger coming along might just walk over it and fall in.

But they didn't want to fill it in.

It had been such hard work digging it. Besides they all had a sneaking fear that the Iron Man might come again, and that the hole was their only weapon against him.

At last they put up a little notice:



to warn people away, and they left it at that.

Now the little boy Hogarth had an idea. He thought he could use that hole, to trap a fox. He found a dead hen one day, and threw it out on to the loose soil over the trap. Then towards evening, he climbed a tree nearby, and waited. A long time he waited. A star came out. He could hear the sea.

Then – there, standing at the edge of the hole, was a fox. A big, red fox, looking towards the dead hen.

Hogarth stopped breathing. And the fox stood without moving – sniff, sniff, sniff, out towards the hen. But he did not step out on to the trap. Slowly, he walked around the wide patch of raw soil till he got back to where he'd started, sniffing all the time out towards the bird. But he did not step out on to the trap. Was he too smart to walk out there where it was not safe?

But at that moment he stopped sniffing. He turned his head and looked

towards the top of the cliff. Hogarth, wondering what the fox had seen, looked towards the top of the cliff.

There, enormous in the blue evening sky, stood the Iron Man, on the brink of the cliff, gazing inland.

In a moment, the fox had vanished.

Now what?

Hogarth carefully quietly hardly breathing climbed slowly down the tree. He must get home and tell his father. But at the bottom of the tree he stopped. He could no longer see the

Iron Man against the twilight sky. Had he gone back over the cliff into the sea? Or was he coming down the hill, in the darkness under that high skyline, towards Hogarth and the farms?

Then Hogarth understood what was happening. He could hear a strange tearing and creaking sound. The Iron Man was pulling up the barbed-wire fence that led down the hill. And soon Hogarth could see him, as he came nearer, tearing the wire from the fence posts, rolling it up like spaghetti and

eating it. The Iron Man was eating the barbed fencing wire.

But if he went along the fence, eating as he moved, he wouldn't come anywhere near the trap, which was out in the middle of the field. He could spend the whole night wandering about the countryside along the fences, rolling up the wire and eating it, and never would any fence bring him near the trap.

But Hogarth had an idea. In his pocket, among other things, he had a

long nail and a knife. He took these out. Did he dare? His idea frightened him. In the silent dusk, he tapped the nail and the knife blade together.

Clink, Clink, Clink!

At the sound of the metal, the Iron Man's hands became still. After a few seconds, he slowly turned his head and the headlamp eyes shone towards Hogarth.

Again, Clink, Clink, Clink! went the nail on the knife.

Slowly, the Iron Man took three

strides towards Hogarth, and again stopped. It was now quite dark. The headlamps shone red. Hogarth pressed close to the tree-trunk. Between him and the Iron Man lay the wide lid of the trap.

Clink, Clink, Clink! again he tapped the nail on the knife.

And now the Iron Man was coming. Hogarth could feel the earth shaking under the weight of his footsteps. Was it too late to run? Hogarth stared at the Iron Man, looming, searching

towards him for the taste of the metal
that had made that inviting sound.

Clink, Clink, Clink! went the nail on
the knife. And

CRASSSHHH!

The Iron Man vanished.

He was in the pit. The Iron Man
had fallen into the pit. Hogarth went
close. The earth was shaking as the
Iron Man struggled underground.
Hogarth peered over the torn edge

of the great pit. Far below, two deep
red headlamps glared up at him from
the pitch blackness. He could hear
the Iron Man's insides grinding down
there and it sounded like a big lorry
grinding its gears on a steep hill.

Hogarth set off. He ran, he ran, home
– home with the great news. And as he
passed the cottages on the way, and as
he turned down the lane towards his
father's farm, he was shouting "The
Iron Man's in the trap!" and "We've
caught the Iron Giant."

When the farmers saw the Iron Man wallowing in their deep pit, they sent up a great cheer. He glared up towards them, his eyes burned from red to purple, from purple to white, from white to fiery whirling black and red, and the cogs inside him ground and screeched, but he could not climb out of the steep-sided pit.

Then under the lights of car headlamps, the farmers brought bulldozers and earth-pushers, and they began to push in on top of the



struggling Iron Man all the earth they had dug when they first made the pit and that had been piled off to one side.

The Iron Man roared again as the earth began to fall on him. But soon he roared no more. Soon the pit was full of earth. Soon the Iron Man was buried silent, packed down under all the soil, while the farmers piled the earth over him in a mound and in a hill. They went to and fro over the mound on their new tractors, which they'd bought since the Iron Man ate

their old ones, and they packed the earth down hard. Then they all went home talking cheerfully. They were sure they had seen the last of the Iron Man.

Only Hogarth felt suddenly sorry. He felt guilty. It was he, after all, who had lured the Iron Man into the pit.



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What's to be Done with the Iron Man?

So the Spring came round the following year, leaves unfurled from the buds, daffodils speared 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 if 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 double-decker 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.