

# THE IRON MAN

*Ted Hughes*

## Chapter 3

### The Space-Being and the Iron Man

One day there came strange news. Everybody was talking about it. One of the stars of the night sky had begun to change.

This star had always been a very tiny star, of no importance at all. It had shone up there for billions and trillions and sillions of years in the Constellation of Orion, that great shape of the giant hunter that strides across space on autumn and winter nights. In all its time this tiny star had never changed in any way.

Now, suddenly, it began to get bigger.

Astronomers, peering through their telescopes, noticed it first. They watched it with worried frowns.

That tiny star was definitely getting bigger. And not just bigger. But bigger and Bigger and BIGger. Each night it was BIGGER.

Bigger than the Dog-star, the large, coloured twinkler at the heel of the Hunter Orion.

Bigger than Jupiter, the great blazing planet.

Everybody could see it clearly, night after night, as it grew and Grew and GREW. They stared up with frightened faces.

Till at last it hung there in the sky over the world, blazing down, the size of the moon, a deep, gloomy red. And now there could be only one explanation. That star was getting bigger because it was getting nearer. And nearer and NEARer and NEARER.

It was rushing towards the world.

Faster than a bullet.

Faster than any rocket.

Faster even than a meteorite.

And if it hit the world at that speed, why, the whole world would simply be blasted to bits in the twinkling of an eye. It would be like an Express train hitting a bowl of goldfish.

No wonder the people stared up with frightened faces. No wonder the astronomers watched it through their telescopes with worried frowns.

But all of a sudden – a strange thing!

The star seemed to have stopped.

There it hung, a deep and gloomy red, just the size of the moon. It got no smaller. It got no bigger. It wasn't coming any nearer. But it wasn't going away either.

Now everybody tried to explain why and how this was. What had happened?

What was happening? What was going to happen?

And now it was that the next strange thing occurred – the astronomers noticed it first.

In the middle of the giant star, a tiny black speck appeared. On the second night this speck was seen to be wriggling, and much bigger. On the third night, you could see it without a telescope. A struggling black speck in the centre of that giant, red, gloomy star.

On the fifth night, the astronomers saw that it seemed to be either a bat, or a black angel, or a flying lizard – a dreadful silhouette, flying out of the centre of that giant star, straight towards the earth. What was coming out of the giant star?

Each night, when the astronomers returned to their telescopes to peer up, this black flying horror was bigger. With slow, gigantic wingbeats, with long, slow writhings of its body, it was coming down through space, outlined black against its red star.

Within a few more nights, its shape had completely blotted out the red star.

The nameless, immense bat-angel was flying down at the earth, like a great black swan. It was definitely coming straight at the earth.

It took several days to cover the distance.

Then, for one awful night, its wings seemed to be filling most of the sky. The moon peered fearfully from low on the skyline and all the people of earth stayed up, gazing in fear at the huge black movement of wings that filled the night.

Next morning it landed – on Australia.

Barrump!

The shock of its landing rolled round the earth like an earthquake, spilling teacups in London, jolting pictures off walls in California, cracking statues off their pedestals in Russia.

The thing had actually landed – and it was a terrific dragon.

Terribly black, terribly scaly, terribly knobby, terribly horned, terribly hairy, terribly clawed, terribly fanged, with vast indescribably terrible eyes, each one as big as Switzerland. There it sat, covering the whole of Australia, its tail trailing away over Tasmania into the sea, its foreclaws on the headlands of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Luckily, the mountains and hills propped its belly up clear of the valleys, and the Australians could still move about in the pitch darkness, under this new sky, this low queer covering, of scales. They crowded towards the light that came in along its sides. Of course, whoever had been on a mountain-top when the dragon landed had been squashed flat. Nothing could be done about them. And there the horror sat, glaring out over the countries of the world.

What had it come for? What was going to happen to the world now this monstrosity had arrived?

Everybody waited. The newspapers spoke about nothing else. Aircraft flew near this space-bat-angel-dragon, taking photographs. It lay over Australia higher than any mountains, higher than the Hindu Kush in Asia, and its head alone was the size of Italy.

For a whole day, while the people of the earth trembled and wept and prayed to God to save them, the space-bat-angel-dragon lay resting its chin sunk in the Indian Ocean, the sea coming not quite up to its bottom lip.

But the next morning, early, its giant voice came rumbling round the world.

The space-bat-angel-dragon was speaking. It wanted to be fed. And what it wanted to eat was – living things. People, animals, forests, it didn't care which, so long as the food was alive. But it had better be fed quickly, otherwise it would roll out its tongue longer than the Trans-Siberian railway, and lick huge swathes of life off the surface of the earth – cities, forests, farmlands, whatever there was. It would leave the world looking like a charred pebble – unless it were fed and fed quickly.

Its voice shook and rumbled around the earth for a whole hour as it delivered its message. Finally, it ended, and lay waiting.

The peoples of the world got together. If they fed it, how could they ever satisfy it? It would never be full, and every new day it would be as hungry as ever. How can you feed a beast the size of Australia? Australia is a vast land, all the countries of Europe will fit easily into Australia. The monster's stomach alone must be the size of Germany.

No, they wouldn't feed it. The people of the world decided they would not feed this space-bat-angel-dragon or whatever it was – they would fight it. They would declare war on it, and all get together to blast it off the face of the earth. And so it was that all the peoples of earth declared war on the monster, and sent out their armed forces in a grand combined operation.

What a terrific attack!

Rockets, projectiles of all sorts, missiles and bombs, shells and flame-throwers – everything was tried. The smoke of the explosions drifted out over the Pacific like a black, crawling continent. The noise of the battle shook the world almost as much as the landing of the dragon had done, and for much longer.

Then the noise died down and the smoke cleared. And the peoples of the world cried in dismay. The dragon was actually smiling. Smiling! Aircraft flying daringly near photographed the vast face smiling, and the picture was in all the papers.

It was smiling as if it had been well tickled.

Now the peoples of the world were worried. They were all great fighters. All spent their spare money on preparing for wars, always making bigger and better weapons, and now they had all tried their utmost to blast this thing off the earth, and what was the result?

The dragon merely smiled, and not a scratch could be seen anywhere on its body.

Human weapons had no effect on it.

But that wasn't surprising. This creature had come from the depths of space, out of the heart of a star. Nobody knew what it was made of. Perhaps it could not be destroyed by any means whatsoever.

And now the space-bat-angel-dragon spoke again.

It gave the peoples of the world one week in which to prepare its first meal.

They could prepare what they liked, said the dragon. But if the meal was not ready in a week, then he would start on the cities and towns.

The peoples of the earth, the kings, the Presidents and Ministers, the farmers and the factory workers and the office workers began to lament. Now what would happen to them? They would like to say the monster didn't exist, but how could they? There it was, covering Australia, staring out over all the countries of the world.

Now the little boy Hogarth heard all about this. Everybody in the world was talking about it, worrying about it.

He was sure the Iron Man could do something. Compared to the space-bat-angel-dragon the Iron Man wasn't very big, of course. The Iron Man was only the size of a tall tree. Nevertheless, Hogarth had faith in the Iron Man.

He visited the Iron Man in his scrap-yard, and talked to him about his great monster that was threatening the earth.

"Please," he asked, "please can't you thin of some way of getting rid of it? If you can't, then it's the end of us all."

The Iron Man chewed thoughtfully at his favourite tidbit, a juicy, spicy old gas-stove. He shook his head slowly.

"Please think of something," cried Hogarth. "If this space-bat-angel-dragon licks all life off the earth, that'll be the end of your scrap iron – there'll be no people left to make it."

The Iron Man became still. He seemed to be thinking. Suddenly his headlamps blazed red, green, blue and white all at once. And he stood up. In a great grinding voice, he gave his commands. Hogarth danced for joy. The Iron Man had had the most stupendous idea. The Iron Man would go out, as the champion of the earth, against this monster from space.