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Opening extract from

The Iron Woman

Written by

Ted Hughes

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Faber Children's Books

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FABER CLASSICS

The Iron Woman

A Sequel to
The Iron Man



TED HUGHES was born in Yorkshire in 1930. His first book, *The Hawk in the Rain*, was published by Faber in 1957, and was followed by many volumes of poetry and prose for both children and adults. He was Poet Laureate from 1984 and was appointed to the Order of Merit in 1998, the year in which he died.

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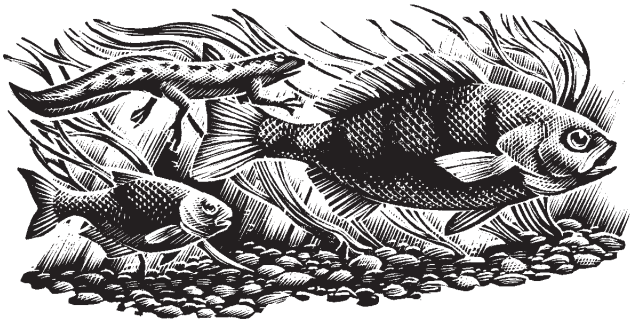
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School was over and the Easter holidays had begun. Lucy was walking home, between the reed banks, along the marsh road, when it started to happen. She had just come to the small bridge, where the road goes over the deep drain. She called this Otterfeast Bridge, because once she had seen an otter on the edge of it, over the black water, eating an eel. That had been three years before. But she still felt excitement whenever she came to this part of the road, and she always looked ahead eagerly, towards the bridge.

Today, as usual, the bridge was empty. As she crossed over it, she looked between the rails, into the black

water. She always did this, just in case there might be an otter down there, in the water, looking up at her, or maybe swimming beneath at that very moment.

And today, there was something. But what was it, down there in the water? She leaned over the rail and peered.

Something deep in the dark water, something white, kept twisting. A fish?

Suddenly she knew. It was an eel – behaving in the strangest way. At first, she thought it must be two eels, fighting. But no, it was just one eel. It knotted itself and unknotted. Then it swam quickly round in circles, corkscrewing over and over as it went. At one point, its tail flipped right out of the water. Then it was writhing down into the mud, setting a grey cloud drifting. Then it was up at the surface again, bobbing its head into the air. She saw its beaky face, then its little mouth opening. She saw the pale inside of its mouth.

Then it was writhing and tumbling in a knot. Quite a small eel, only a foot long.

As it danced its squirming, circling, darting dance,

it was drifting along in the current of the drain. Soon she lost sight of it under the water shine. Then, twenty yards downstream, she saw its head bob up again. Then a swirl and it vanished. Then up again, bob, bob, bob.

What was wrong with it? Seeing its peculiar head bobbing up like that, and its little mouth opening, she had felt a painful twist somewhere in her middle. She had wanted to scoop the eel up and help it. It needed help. Something was wrong with it.

At that moment, staring along the dimpled shine of the drain where it curved away among the tall reeds, she felt something else.

At first, she had no idea what made her head go dizzy and her feet stagger. She gripped the bridge rail and braced her feet apart. She thought she had felt the rail itself give her hand a jolt.

What was it?

'Garronk! Garronk! Garraaaaaark!'

The floppy, untidy shape of a heron was scrambling straight up out of the reed beds. It did not flap away in stately slow motion, like an ordinary heron. It flailed

and hoisted itself up, exactly as if it were bounding up an invisible spiral stair. Then, from a great height, it tumbled away towards the sea beyond the marsh. Something had scared it badly. But what? Something in the marsh had frightened it. And seeing the heron so frightened frightened Lucy.

The marsh was always a lonely place. Now she felt the loneliness. As she stood there, looking up, the whole bluish and pinky sky of soft cloud moved slowly. She looked again along the drain, where the reeds leaned all one way, bowing gently in the light wind. The eel was no longer to be seen. Was it still writhing and bobbing its head up, as the slow flow carried it away through the marsh? She looked down into the drain, under the bridge. The black water moved silently, crumpling and twirling little whorls of light.

Then it came again. Beneath her feet the bridge road jumped and the rail jarred her hand. At the same moment, the water surface of the drain was blurred by a sudden mesh of tiny ripples all over it.

An earthquake! It must be an earthquake.

A completely new kind of fear gripped Lucy. For a few seconds she did not dare to move. The thought of the bridge collapsing and dropping her into the drain with its writhing eels was bad enough. But the thought of the marsh itself opening a great crack, and herself and all the water and mud and eels and reeds pouring into bottomless black, maybe right into the middle of the earth, was worse. She felt her toes curling like claws and the soles of her feet prickling with electricity.

Quickly then she began to walk – but it was like walking on a bouncy narrow plank between skyscrapers. She lifted each foot carefully and set it down firmly and yet gently. As fast as she dared, and yet quite slow. But soon – she couldn't help it – she started running. What if that earthquake shock had brought the ceiling down on her mother? Or even shaken the village flat, like dominoes? And what if some great towering piece of machinery, at the factory, had toppled on to her father?

And then, as she ran, it came again, pitching her off balance, so that her left foot hit her right calf and down she went. As she lay there, flat and winded, it

came again. This time, the road seemed to hit her chest and stomach, a strong, hard thump. Then another. And each time, she saw the road gravel under her face jump slightly. And it was then, as she lay there, that she heard the weirdest sound. Nothing like any bird she had ever heard. It came from out of the marsh behind her. It was a long wailing cry, like a fire-engine siren. She jumped up and began to run blindly.

Already the head was out. It still didn't look much like a head – simply a gigantic black lump, crowned with reeds and streaming with mud. But the mouth was clear, and after that first wailing cry the lips moved slowly, like a crab's, spitting out mud and roots.

Half an hour passed before the lump moved again. As it moved, the reeds away to either side of it bulged upwards and heaved, and the black watery mud streamed through them. The mouth opened and a long booming groan came out of it, as the head hoisted clear. Another groan became a wailing roar. A seagull blowing across the marsh like a paper scrap veered wildly upwards as the streaming shape reared

in front of it, like a sudden wall of cliff, pouring cataracts of black mud and clotted, rooty lumps of reeds where grass snakes squirmed and water voles flailed their forepaws, blinking their eyes and squealing as they fell.

The black shape was the size of two or three elephants. It looked like a hippopotamus-headed, gigantic dinosaur, dragging itself on all fours up out of a prehistoric tar pit. But now, still like a dinosaur, it sat upright. And all at once it looked human – immense but human. Great hands clawed at the head, flinging away squatches of muddy reeds. Then, amid gurglings and suckings, and with a groaning wail, the thing stood erect. A truly colossal, man-shaped statue of black mud, raking itself and groaning, towered over the lonely marsh.

About half a mile away a birdwatcher was bent over a bittern's nest, holding a dead bittern and feeling the cold eggs on which the dead bird had been sitting. From his hide, only ten feet away, he had been watching this bird all day, waiting for the eggs to start hatching.

He knew the chicks were already overdue. When those first quakes had come, shuddering his camera on its tripod, he had told himself they were distant quarry blastings. He had guessed the strange wailing must be some kind of factory siren. He knew there was a big factory outside the town, only two or three miles away. What else could such things be? And when that second booming wail had come, he had just seen something far more startling. He stared through his binoculars. Two big blowflies were inspecting the eye of the bittern on the nest. With a shock, he realized the bird was dead. All day, and probably yesterday too, he had been watching a dead bird. This was more important than any noises. So he had waded out, and lifted the dead mother from her eggs. He was horrified. She was quite stiff.

And it was then, as he stood there, thinking that he must take this bird and her eggs to be examined by some scientist, to find out what had killed them, it was then that the third wail came, far louder than the earlier ones. At the same moment the marsh shook, like a vast jelly, and he thought: An earthquake!



And maybe that's a siren warning!

He had made his hide at the edge of some higher ground that stuck out into the marsh from the road. Big bushy willow trees behind him blocked his view of what had terrified the heron and the seagull. But he was alarmed enough by the idea of an earthquake. Cradling the cold eggs in one hand, with the dead bittern tucked under his arm, he collected his camera and returned to his car parked among the willows. As he opened the car door, another jolt shook it.

He drove out along grassy ruts on to the road, not far from the bridge where Lucy had stood watching the eel. As he turned right, towards the town, his eyes widened and his brain whirled. The swaying, lumpy, black tower, about a hundred yards ahead, close to the road, could not possibly be anything. Unless it was some structure for aerials, something to do with radar, maybe, draped in camouflage. Even when it moved, he still tried to explain it. Maybe it was a windmill, without arms, being moved – as they move whole houses in America. Or maybe some film company was making a film, a horror film; it could

be, and that would account for the hideous noises too. He simply did not know what to think – so he went on driving towards it.

But when it stepped out on to the road directly in front of him, he jammed on his brakes.

This, he could see, was something new. This had come up all on its own out of the marsh mud. Clumps and tangles of reeds still slithered down its black length, with the slime. As it dawned on him what he was looking at, his head seemed to freeze. That was his hair trying to stand on end. Tears of pure fear began to pour down his cheeks. But he was a photographer – and no true photographer ever misses a chance.

He bundled his camera with him out of the car, snatched off the lens cover, and bowed over the viewfinder.

Blackness filled it. He backed away, swinging the camera from side to side, trying to squeeze the whole huge shape into the frame. But even before he got it full length he saw, in his viewfinder, that it had picked up his car. Aghast, but also overjoyed, he took shot after shot as the great figure slammed

his car down on to the road, raised it high and slammed it down again, and again, and again, like somebody trying to beat the dust out of a heavy rug. The birdwatcher remembered, with a fleeting pang, the bittern's eggs. They had been nested in his cap on the passenger seat. But he forgot them as he saw the paint and glass exploding, like steam, each time the car banged down on to the road. Doors flew off, wheels bounded into the reeds, and the mouth in the head opened. As the terrible siren wail came out of that mouth, the birdwatcher turned and ran.

Fast as he ran, he wasn't fast enough. The black, mad giant bounced the twisted, steel-bright tin can of a car into the reeds, then gouged up a handful of marsh mud clotted with weedy roots.

The birdwatcher thought the swamp monster must have caught up with him and kicked him. But it was the flung mass of mud that slammed him from behind, wrapped round him and swept him many yards along the road. He struggled out of it and clutching his greasy camera, spitting out the foul black mire, and sodden, he ran for his life.