

The Rough Places Plain

By DENNIS McELDOWNEY

WHEN they arrived for him Hugh was standing in the doorway with his little case on the step at his feet. He didn't make a move; he just stood there quivering, almost visibly quivering. Mr. Johnson left the car, went over to him, shook hands. Hugh's were wet with excitement.

"Gee, it's good of you," Hugh said to him. "Gee."

"That's all right," Mr. Johnson said, and picked up the bag. Hugh followed him to the car and stood by while the bag was put inside, stood there, still quivering, waiting to be told where to get in. A cluster of other patients stood watching. Faces peered from the windows. Ten-year-old Mary Johnson swivelled around on the back seat looking from one face to another, taking it all in. She tapped her mother on the shoulder to draw her attention, but her mother didn't move. She sat straight up in the front seat and looked steadily ahead of her, neither looking at anyone nor showing that she was aware of being looked at. But when Hugh was installed in the back seat beside Mary, Mrs. Johnson turned to him with a smile and hoped he felt quite happy about sitting there.

"Anywhere, I'll sit anywhere. Don't worry about me, anywhere'll do, I don't want to be any trouble," Hugh said breathlessly. "Are you quite comfy where you are?" he asked anxiously.

"Quite comfy, thank you," Mrs. Johnson said, crinkling the corner of her eye.

"That's all right, then: I'll just sit here and you sit there, and we'll all be happy. Gee, it's good of you."

"Well, I told your mother we'd keep an eye on you while she was away. It was the least thing we could do, I told her, she's always been so good to us; and it's so lovely for her to be able to get away with your father for a whole month. She needed a holiday so badly, it'll do her a world of good. And as I said to her, you always used to love visiting us when you were a wee boy."

Mary had transferred her gaze from the people outside to Hugh, and he suddenly became conscious of it.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," he said, and he looked at her with a puzzled expression. "Is this little girl yours?" he asked Mrs. Johnson. "Don't you remember Mary?" Mrs. Johnson asked, surprised.

"Mary? Is that her name?"

"Of course, she was quite a lot smaller when you saw her last," Mrs. Johnson explained hurriedly, making excuses for him, afraid she had been tactless. "She's grown a lot since then, and some of our relatives say she's changed, too. She used to be more like her father, but now she's beginning to take after my side of the family, which, to my mind, is an improvement, but her father doesn't agree with me." But all her talking didn't conceal from Hugh the fact that he'd been expected to remember. He searched for words.

"It's hard to remember sometimes; I mean, you're out in the outside all the time and you've got a chance to keep an eye on things, but when you've been away a long time like I have you forget some people's faces sometimes."

"That's right," said Mr. Johnson, who hadn't been listening. "Hold tight," and he let in the clutch and they were off. Some of the other patients waved and Mary waved back until they were

through the gates and out of sight; but Hugh didn't look behind him. They drove along by the sea for the first few miles and Hugh watched and talked about it to himself, happily identifying launches and seagulls. Then they turned inland into the hills, and the two in front became tense, having been warned what was likely to happen. Hugh also tensed up, for a different reason. His muttering came fast, less coherent. Mrs. Johnson turned around to him and wanted to know if he was enjoying his drive. He said he was, without much conviction. She pointed out some sheep to him, to distract his mind. Mary found a goat.

"They have the hills so close to the road here, don't they?" Hugh said uneasily.

"We'll soon be home," Mrs. Johnson soothed. "I don't expect you remember our house very well. We've done a lot of work in the garden since you were there last; we've improved things so much you'd scarcely recognise it. The gardening bug's got us, that's what it is."

"Wild," Hugh said, looking at the patches of bush in the gullies, the patches of broom and gorse. "I suppose they'll clean them up some day."

"They're going to open this part up for housing quite soon, I believe," Mrs. Johnson told him.

"That's good," he said. "They'll tidy them up then. They'll have to." He was pressing himself into the corner of the seat, and in a little while began chanting. "Look out, look out, look out."

Mrs. Johnson turned sharply. Mr. Johnson let the car swerve slightly and then took a firm grip on the wheel. Mary stared at Hugh, who sat quite still. "Is he having a fit?" she wanted to know in a penetrating whisper.

"Hush," said her mother, continuing to look nervously over her shoulder. "Don't you think we ought to stop, Doug, until he comes to?"

"No, the sooner we get out of this patch the better. He won't do any harm as long as he isn't bothered."

"You wouldn't like to climb over here with us, Mary?"

"No, it's all right, I want to watch him. He isn't doing anything."

Down the other side of the hill they were soon in suburban streets, and Hugh was out of the fit without being aware he'd been in it. He watched out of the window with pleasure now, talking to himself again. "Pretty," he said, "pretty," as rows of gardens slid by. They turned from street to street, guided by instinct one would have thought from all the difference there was to show them the way. Lawnmowers whirled along strips of grass by the edge of the road, dogs chased yapping after the car, children raced tricycles along the footpaths, a postman balancing himself on his bicycle slid identical envelopes into identical letter-boxes. Hugh was so engrossed in enjoying all this that he hardly noticed they had turned into one of the bright gardens and that the landscape had become stationary instead of moving past them. But Mr. and Mrs. Johnson and Mary were each opening a door and getting out, and very soon he noticed.

"Here already?" he said.

"Here already," Mr. Johnson said. "How are you feeling?" He opened the fourth door and Hugh climbed out and looked about him.



"My word, your garden's pretty," Hugh confided, "my word it is"

"We're going to the pictures this afternoon," Mary said.

"Hush," her mother said. They didn't want to get him excited beforehand. "You run along now over to the Andersons and play."

"I want to stay here."

"Mary!" her father said. She went reluctantly, looking back at Hugh.

"It wouldn't have worried me to have her here," Hugh said. "I like children." They were startled to realise he had known what was going on.

"There's so much noise," Mrs. Johnson said.

"Kids are always noisy," Mr. Johnson said.

"Oh, but they have to be," Hugh explained. "They can't get their happiness without making some noise. They have to have their happiness."

"If I know Mary," her father said, "you'll hear her getting her happiness even if she's four doors away."

"I like to hear children, I don't hear them very often. There aren't any children where we are."

But they didn't offer to call Mary back; they steered him inside to the bathroom and when they had got him there, keeping near so they would hear any untoward sounds, they discussed him in low voices.

"His parents did say he'd deteriorated lately," Mr. Johnson said.

"I know they did, but I'd no idea it had gone so far. Poor chap—do you remember how bright he was when he was small? He was quite brilliant at school. It's quite pathetic. Did you hear him complaining they had the hills so close to the roads? I do feel sorry for his poor mother."

When he came out Mrs. Johnson had started to put the lunch together, so Mr. Johnson offered to let Hugh watch him working in the garden, which Hugh was glad to do.

"It's a nice place you've got here," he confided, as he stood and watched Mr. Johnson dig his fork into a clump of plants he no longer required. He ran his finger a little uneasily over his chin, which had been shaved in a hurry and not very successfully by one of the attendants. "Your house is rather a peculiar colour, but it's very nice really. And my word, your garden's pretty. My word it is."

Mr. Johnson treasured up the remark about the peculiar colour to tell his wife when he could get her alone, and meanwhile set off for the hacksaw to tackle a shrub which was getting above itself. Mrs. Johnson saw what he was about from the kitchen window and wandered out. The hills were looming closer, much more distinct than usual; the Johnsons would have said it was a sign of rain on the way if they had been looking towards them, but they were both considering the shrub, and Hugh's eyes followed theirs.

"I suppose you have to get rid of it," she said. "But it's such a pity. It has such a dear little white flower in the late autumn when flowers are getting scarce."

"I know," her husband said. "But look what it's doing—sprawling all over the place, upsetting the whole plan of the garden." And he looked around comparing the independence this shrub was showing with the little disciplined clumps which dotted the garden like decorations on a dinner-plate. "I'm not going to let my garden turn itself into a wilderness for all your dear little white flowers."

"I know it's got to go," she said; "I was only doing a little moan while you went about it."

"That's all right, then," he said, and he applied the saw to its stem.

"Don't you like our garden, Hugh?" she asked. He had been watching the scene with approval.

"It's a pretty garden, Mrs. Johnson. You two are like me. You like things to be tidy. Not like the messy hills we came along."

They looked at him a little oddly when he said that, and then looked at one another and smiled. Smiled at his quaint ways of talking—reassuring themselves. And though they did their duty to him the rest of the day, and more than their duty because they had real compassion for him; though they took him to the pictures and gave him dinner and showed him their photograph album and put him to bed (and didn't sleep a wink in case he shouldn't be sleeping well), they were relieved enough to take him back next day, because that was where he really belonged. And, of course, he had a fit again on the hill going over.