

The Children of Dynmouth

a novel by

William Trevor



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WILLIAM TREVOR

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*For
Patrick
and Dominic*

THE
CHILDREN
OF DYNMOUTH

I

Dynmouth nestled on the Dorset coast, gathered about what was once the single source of its prosperity, a small fishing harbour. In the early eighteenth century it had been renowned for its lacemaking and its turbot, and had later developed prettily as a watering place. Being still small, it was now considered unspoilt, a seaside resort of limited diversions, its curving promenade and modest pier stylish with ornamental lamp-posts, painted green. At the foot of grey-brown cliffs a belt of shingle gave way to the sand on which generations of Dynmouth's children had run and played, and built castles with moats and flag-poles.

In an unspectacular way the town had expanded inland along the valley of the Dyn. Where sheep had grazed on sloping downs a sandpaper factory stood now and opposite it, on the other side of the river, a tile-works. At the eastern end of the promenade, near the car-park and the public lavatories, there was a fish-packing station. Plastic lampshades were scheduled to be manufactured soon on a site that had once been known as Long Dog's Field, and there were rumours – denied by the town council – that the Singer Sewing Machine organisation had recently looked the town over with a view to developing a plant there. There were three banks in Dynmouth, Lloyd's, Barclay's and the National Westminster. There were municipal tennis-courts beside the Youth Centre, and a Baptist chapel and a Methodist chapel, the Church of England's St Simon and St Jude, the Catholic Queen of Heaven. There were nine hotels and nineteen boarding-houses,

eleven public houses and one fish and chip shop, Phyl's Phries, next to the steam laundry on the Dymouth Junction road. There was the East Street Bingo and Whist-Drive Hall and the ancient Essoldo Cinema in flaking pink, dim and cavernous within. Sir Walter Raleigh Park, enclosed by ornamental railings that matched the promenade's lamp-posts, was rented from the council by Ring's Amusements every summer season. Spreading inland from the cliffs, a golf-course had been laid out in 1936.

Winter and summer alike, every Sunday afternoon, the Badstoneleigh and Dymouth Salvation Army Band marched through the town. Twice a week or so the Dymouth Hards, a gang of motor-cyclists in fringed black leather, rampaged by night, with their black-fringed girl-friends crouched on pillions behind them. In 1969 there'd been a strike at the sand-paper factory. In 1970 an assistant chef at the Queen Victoria Hotel, dissatisfied with the terms of his employment, attempted to burn the building down by soaking curtains and bedclothes in paraffin, an incident that was reported on an inside page of the *Daily Telegraph*. The man, a Sicilian, was stated by Dr Greenslade to be insane.

A pattern, familiar elsewhere too, prevailed in Dymouth. The houses of the well-to-do, solitary and set in generous gardens, were followed in order of such esteem by semi-detached villas that stood like twins in Dymouth's tree-lined avenues and crescents. After which came dwellings that had a look of economy about them, reflecting the burden of rent or mortgage. Far from the sea-front and the centre of the town was the sprawl of council estates and sand-yellow blocks of council flats. In streets near the river there were terraced houses of cramped proportions, temporarily occupied by those who waited for their names to rise to the top of a housing list. So close to the river that they were regularly flooded by it were the cottages of Boughs Lane, which people said

were a disgrace. The handsomest dwelling in Dynmouth was Sea House, high on the cliffs beside the golf-course, famous for the azaleas of its garden.

Of the town's 4,139 inhabitants half were children. There were three nursery schools: the Ring-o-Roses, Lavinia Featherston's at the rectory, and the WRVS Playgroup. There was Dynmouth Primary School, Dynmouth Comprehensive and the Loretto Convent. There was Down Manor Orphanage, red-brick and barrack-like, beyond the electricity plant, and Dynmouth Nurseries, a mile outside the town. The Youth Centre was run by John and Ted.

The children of Dynmouth were as children anywhere. They led double lives; more regularly than their elders they travelled without moving from a room. They saw a different world: the sun looked different to them, and so did Dynmouth's trees and grass and sand. Dogs loomed at a different level, eye to eye. Cats arched their tiger's backs, and the birds behind bars in Moults Hardware and Pet Supplies gazed beadily down, appearing to speak messages. Pairs of Loretto nuns, airing themselves on the promenade, gazed down also, blackly nodding, a crucified body dangling among their black beads. Ring's Amusements were Dynmouth's Paradise.

No longer children, some found office work; others made for the supermarkets, the garages, the hotels, Dynmouth Lace Ltd, the printing-works of the *Badstoneleigh and Dynmouth News*, the laundry. Since the time of Queen Victoria – who visited the town – tea-shops had been a feature: there were twelve now, offering indifferent wages to girls who were nimble on their feet. A few boys became trawler-men, but life was easier and richer at the fish-packing station, and in the sandpaper factory and the tile-works. Some made their careers outside the town when the time came, even though Dynmouth remained home for them and was thought of with

affection. Some couldn't stand the town and dreamed, while still children, of being other people in other places.

Lavinia Featherston, who had been herself a child of Dymouth, remembered when the green ornamental lamp-posts were all of a sudden huge no longer and when the grey-brown cliffs appeared to have been re-cut to size and the Spinning Wheel Tea-Rooms seemed almost tatty. The rectory she lived in now, an ivy-clad building set among ragged lawns, had been a mysterious and forbidding house to her as a child, halfway up the hill called Once Hill, partly hidden from the road by a stone wall and a row of macrocarpa trees. It hadn't changed, yet it was not the same. When she surveyed her nursery school in the rectory it sometimes saddened Lavinia that everything would become more ordinary for these children as they grew up, that all too soon the birds in Moul't's Hardware and Pet Supplies would cease to speak messages. She ran her school because she liked the company of children, though sometimes finding it a strain.

She found it so on the afternoon of a Wednesday in early April, the day, in fact, of St Pancras of Sicily, as her husband had remarked at breakfast-time. Outside, it was blustery and cold. Sheets of soft rain dribbled on the rectory's window-panes. The fire in the sitting-room refused to light.

'I'm really cross,' Lavinia said, addressing her twin daughters, aged four. She regarded them sternly from the fireplace, out of breath because she'd been blowing at the charred edges of a newspaper. All day long, she reminded them, they'd been nothing but trouble, painting their hands at nursery school, tearing about Lipton's when she'd told them to stand by the dog-food, and now, apparently, throwing jam at the kitchen window.

'I didn't,' Susannah said.

'Fell.' Repeatedly Deborah nodded, lending weight to that explanation. 'Fell and fell.'

Lavinia Featherston, a pretty, fair-haired woman of thirty-five, told her daughters to stop talking nonsense. Jam didn't fall, she pointed out. Jam wasn't like rain. Jam had to be taken from a pot and thrown. People were starving in the world: it wasn't right to throw jam about a kitchen just because you were bored.

'It fell out of the pot,' Deborah said. 'Goodness knows how it got to the window, Mummy.'

'Goodness knows, Mummy.'

Lavinia continued to look sternly at them. They, too, were fair-haired; they had freckles on the bridges of their noses. Would a boy have looked the same? She'd often wondered that, and wondered it more relevantly just now.

That, at the moment, was the trouble with Lavinia. She was recovering from a miscarriage, feeling nervy and on edge. Everything had been going perfectly until a fortnight ago and then, after the loss of her child, Dr Greenslade had reminded her that he'd warned her against attempting to have it. The warning became an order: in no circumstances was she to attempt to have another baby.

This turn of events had upset Lavinia more than she'd have believed possible. She and Quentin had very much wanted a son; Dr Greenslade stood firm. The disappointment, still recent, was hard to shake off.

'You know what happens to children who tell lies,' she crossly reminded her daughters. 'It's high time you turned over a new leaf.'

The bell at the back-door rang. A stick in the fire began half-heartedly to blaze. Slowly Lavinia gathered herself to her feet. It could be anyone, for the rectory was an open house. It was open to Mrs Slewy, the worst mother in Dynmouth, a shapeless woman who smelt of poverty and cigarettes, who lived in a condemned cottage in Boughs Lane with her five inadequate children. And to the elderly Miss Trimm,

who'd been a school-teacher in the town and nowadays was disturbed in her mind. Children returned for confirmation classes years after they'd left the nursery school, adults came for fellowship discussions. Mrs Keble, the organist, came to talk about hymns, and Father Madden to talk about ecumenicalism. Mrs Stead-Carter came importantly, Miss Poraway for a chat.

Today, though, it was none of these people: it was a figure known in Dynmouth only as Old Ape, who had come a day early for his weekly scraps. The scraps were meant to be for hens he kept, but everyone in Dynmouth knew that he didn't possess hens and that he ate the scraps himself. When he came to the rectory he was also given a plate of meat and vegetables, provided he arrived at six o'clock on the specified day, which was Thursday. 'I'll get the scraps,' Lavinia said at the back door. 'You come back tomorrow for your dinner.' Communication with Old Ape was difficult. It was said that he could speak but chose not to. It wasn't known if he was deaf.

In the sitting-room the twins played with the pieces of a jigsaw, squatting on the hearthrug in front of the damply flickering fire. When you interlocked the pieces of the puzzle there was a picture of a donkey, but they'd seen the donkey so many times it didn't seem worth while going to all that trouble yet again. On the lid of the jigsaw box they built the pieces into a pyre.

'Dragons come,' Susannah said.

'What's dragons, Susannah?'

'They come if you tell lies. They're burny things. They've flames in them.'

But Deborah was thinking of something else. She was thinking of being in the garden, of looking all over the grass and then in the flower-beds and on the gravel by the garage and along by the edges of the paths, until she found a new

leaf. She closed her eyes and saw herself leaning down by the edge of a path and turning the new leaf over to see what was on the other side.

In the kitchen their mother made a cup of tea, and in the streets of Dynmouth their father, the vicar of St Simon and St Jude's, pedalled through the wind and the rain on a 1937 Rudge, left to him in a parishioner's will. He was an impressive figure on this bicycle, rather lanky, his hair prematurely grey, his face seeming ascetic until cheered by a smile that occurred whenever he greeted anyone. He hoped as he went about his familiar Wednesday duty of visiting the sick among his parishioners that Lavinia wasn't having a time with the twins, cooped inside on a damp afternoon. He thought about his wife as he chatted to old, disturbed Miss Trimm, who had a cold, and to little Sharon Lines, who was on a kidney machine. They'd waited almost nine years for the twins to be born: they had a lot to be thankful for but it was hard to comfort a woman who'd lost a child and couldn't have another. Lavinia's moments of despondency were irrational, she said so herself, yet they continued to afflict her. They made her not at all like what she was.

He rode down Fore Street, where holiday-makers who had taken advantage of the pre-Easter rates looked as though they regretted it as they loitered in the rain. Some took refuge in the doorways of shops, eating sweets or nuts. Others read the list of forthcoming attractions outside the Essoldo Cinema where *The Battle of Britain* was at present showing. In Sir Walter Raleigh Park, beside the promenade, Ring's Amusements were preparing for their seasonal opening in ten days' time, on Easter Saturday. Machines were being oiled and repaired, staff taken on, statutory safety precautions pondered over with a view to their evasion. The Hall of a Million Mirrors and the Tunnel of Love and Alfonso's and Annabella's Wall of Death were in the process of erection. The

men who performed this work were of a muscular, weathered appearance, with faded scarves tied round their throats, some with brass rings on their fingers. Like their garish caravans and pin-tables and the swarthy women who assisted them, they seemed to belong to the past. They shouted to one another through the rain, using words that had an old-fashioned ring.

The promenade was almost empty. Commander Abigail strutted along it towards the steps that led to the beach, with his bathing-trunks rolled up in a towel. The slight, carefully clad figure of Miss Lavant moved slowly in the opposite direction, beneath a red umbrella that caught occasionally in the wind. The wind bustled around her, gadding over the concrete of the promenade and up and down the short pier. It rattled the refuse-bins on the ornamental lamp-posts, and the broken glass in the bus-shelters. It played with cigarette packets and wrappings from chocolate and potato crisps. It drove paper bags into corners and left them there, uselessly sodden.

The sea was so far out you could hardly see it. Seagulls stood like small rocks, rooted to the flattened sand. The sky was grey, shadowed with darker grey.

'Cheers, sir,' a voice called, and Quentin Featherston turned his head and saw Timothy Gedge standing on the edge of the pavement, apparently hoping for a word with him. Cautiously, he applied the Rudge's brakes.

Timothy Gedge was a youth of fifteen, ungainly due to adolescence, a boy with a sharp-boned face and wide, thin shoulders, whose short hair was almost white. His eyes seemed hungry, giving him a predatory look; his cheeks had a hollowness about them. He was always dressed in the same clothes: pale yellow jeans and a yellow jacket with a zip, and a T-shirt that more often than not was yellow also. He lived with his mother and his sister, Rose-Ann, in a block of

council-built flats called Cornerways; without distinction, he attended Dynmouth Comprehensive School. He was a boy who was given to making jokes, a habit that caused him sometimes to seem eccentric. He smiled and ~~grinned a~~ lot.

'Hi, Mr Feather,' he said.

'Hullo, Timothy.'

'Nice day, Mr Feather.'

'Well, I don't know about nice —'

'I was meaning for ducks, sir.' He laughed. ~~His clothes~~ were wet. His short pale hair was plastered around ~~his~~ head.

'Did you want to speak to me, Timothy?' He wished the boy would address him by his correct name. He had asked him to, but the boy had pretended not to understand: it was all meant to be a joke.

'I was wondering about the Easter Fête, Mr Feather. Did you know Ring's will be opening up the same afternoon?'

'Ring's always begin on Easter Saturday.'

'That's what I'm saying to you, Mr Feather. Won't Ring's take the crowds?'

'Oh, I don't think so. They haven't in the past.'

'I'd say you were wrong, Mr Feather.'

'Well, we'll just have to see. Thank you for thinking of it, Timothy.'

'I was wondering about the Spot the Talent comp, Mr Feather.'

'We're having the Spot the Talent competition at two-thirty. Mr and Mrs Dass will be in charge again.'

More than a month ago the boy had appeared at the rectory one evening, quite late it had been, after nine o'clock, and had asked if there was going to be a Spot the Talent competition at this year's Easter Fête because he wanted to do a comedy act. Quentin had told him he imagined there would be, with

Mr and Mrs Dass in charge as usual. He'd later heard from the Dasses that Timothy Gedge had been to see them and that they'd written his name down, the first entry.

He was a strange boy, always at a loose end. His mother was a good-looking woman with brassy hair who sold women's clothes in a shop called Cha-Cha Fashions, his sister was six or seven years older than Timothy, good-looking also, employed as a petrol-pump attendant on the forecourt of the Smiling Service Filling Station: Quentin knew them both by sight. In adolescence, unfortunately, the boy was increasingly becoming a nuisance to people, endlessly friendly and smiling, keen for conversation. He was what Lavinia called a latch-key child, returning to the empty flat in Cornerways from the Comprehensive school, on his own in it all day during the school holidays. Being on his own seemed somehow to have become part of him.

'She's a funny woman, that Mrs Dass. He's funny himself, with that pipe.'

'Oh, I don't think so. I must be off, I'm afraid, Timothy.'

'Will it be in the marquee again, sir?'

'I should think so.'

'D'you know the Abigails, Mr Feather? The Commander and Mrs? I do jobs for the Abigails, you know. Every Wednesday night; I'll be round there tonight. Funny type of people.'

Quentin shook his head. He knew the Abigails, he said; they didn't seem funny to him. His right foot was on the pedal, but he couldn't push the bicycle forward because the boy was slightly in the way, his knee touching the spokes of the front wheel.

'The Commander's having his bathe now. I call that funny. In the sea in April, Mr Feather.' He paused, smiling. 'I see Miss Lavant's out on her stroll.'

'Yes, I know -'