

BY L.P.
HARTLEY

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THE SHRIMP
AND THE ANEMONE

I've known a hundred kinds of love,
All made the loved one rue.

EMILY BRONTË.



by the same author

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THE SIXTH HEAVEN
EUSTACE AND HILDA

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THE SHRIMP
AND THE ANEMONE

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by

L. P. HARTLEY



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To
OSBERT SITWELL

and to
the dear memory of

K.A.L.

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Chapter I

The Shrimp and the Anemone

"EUSTACE! Eustace!" Hilda's tones were always urgent; it might not be anything very serious. Eustace bent over the pool. His feet sank in its soggy edge, so he drew back, for he must not get them wet. But he could still see the anemone. Its base was fastened to a boulder, just above the water-line. From the middle of the other end, which was below, something stuck out, quivering. It was a shrimp, Eustace decided, and the anemone was eating it, sucking it in. A tumult arose in Eustace's breast. His heart bled for the shrimp, he longed to rescue it; but, on the other hand, how could he bear to rob the anemone of its dinner? The anemone was more beautiful than the shrimp, more interesting and much rarer. It was a 'plumose' anemone; he recognised it from the picture in his Natural History, and the lovely feathery epithet stroked the fringes of his mind like a caress. If he took the shrimp away, the anemone might never catch another, and die of hunger. But while he debated the unswallowed part of the shrimp grew perceptibly smaller.

Once more, mingled with the cries of the seamews and pitched even higher than theirs, came Hilda's voice.

"Eustace! Eustace! Come here! The bank's breaking! It's your fault! You never mended your side!"

Here was another complication. Ought he not perhaps to go to Hilda and help her build up the bank? It was true he had scamped his side, partly because he was piqued with her for always taking more than her fair share. But then she was a girl and older than he and she did it for his good, as she had often told him, and in order that he might not overstrain himself. He leaned on his wooden spade and, looking doubtfully round, saw Hilda signalling with her iron one. An ancient jealousy invaded his heart. Why should *she* have an iron spade? He tried to fix his mind on the anemone. The shrimp's tail was still visible but wriggling more feebly. Horror at its plight began to swamp all

other considerations. He made up his mind to release it. But how? If he waded into the water he would get his socks wet, which would be bad enough; if he climbed on to the rock he might fall in and get wet all over, which would be worse. There was only one thing to do.

"Hilda," he cried, "come here."

His low soft voice was whirled away by the wind; it could not compete with the elements, as Hilda's could.

He called again. It was an effort for him to call: he screwed his face up: the cry was unmelodious now that he forced it, more like a squeak than a summons.

But directly she heard him Hilda came, as he knew she would. Eustace put the situation before her, weighing the pros and cons. Which was to be sacrificed, the anemone or the shrimp? Eustace stated the case for each with unflinching impartiality and began to enlarge on the felicity that would attend their after-lives, once this situation was straightened out—forgetting, in his enthusiasm, that the well-being of the one depended on the misfortune of the other. But Hilda cut him short.

"Here, catch hold of my feet," she said.

She climbed on to the boulder, and flung herself face down on the sea-weedy slope. Eustace followed more slowly, showing respect for the inequalities of the rock. Then he lowered himself, sprawling uncertainly and rather timidly, and grasped his sister's thin ankles with hands that in spite of his nine years still retained some of the chubbiness of infancy. Once assumed, the position was not uncomfortable. Eustace's thoughts wandered, while his body automatically accommodated itself to the movements of Hilda, who was wriggling ever nearer to the edge.

"I've got it," said Hilda at last in a stifled voice. There was no elation, only satisfaction in her tone, and Eustace knew that something had gone wrong.

"Let me look!" he cried, and they struggled up from the rock.

The shrimp lay in the palm of Hilda's hand, a sad, disappointing sight. Its reprieve had come too late; its head was mangled and there was no vibration in its tail. The horrible appearance fascinated Eustace for a moment, then upset him so much that he turned away with trembling lips. But there was worse to come. As a result of Hilda's forcible interference with its meal the anemone had been partially disembowelled; it could not give up

its prey without letting its digestive apparatus go too. Part of its base had come unstuck and was seeking feebly to attach itself to the rock again. Eustace took Hilda's other hand and together they surveyed the unfortunate issue of their kind offices.

"Hadn't we better kill them both?" asked Eustace with a quaver in his voice, "since they're both wounded?"

He spoke euphemistically, for the shrimp was already dead.

But Hilda did not despair so easily.

"Let's put it in the water," she suggested. "Perhaps that'll make it come to."

A passing ripple lent the shrimp a delusive appearance of life; when the ripple subsided it floated to the surface, sideways up, and lay still.

"Never mind," said Hilda, "we'll see if the anemone will eat it now."

Again they disposed themselves on the rock, and Hilda, with her head downwards and her face growing redder every minute, tried her hardest to induce the anemone to resume its meal. For the sake of achieving this end she did not shrink from the distasteful task of replacing the anemone's insides where they belonged, but her amateur surgery failed to restore its appetite and it took no interest in the proffered shrimp.

"I wish we'd let them alone," sobbed Eustace.

"What would have been the good of that?" demanded Hilda, wiping her brother's eyes. He stood quiescent, his hands hanging down and his face turned upwards, showing no shame at being comforted and offering no resistance, as though he was familiar with the performance and expected it. "We had to do something," Hilda continued. "We couldn't let them go on like that."

"Why couldn't we?" asked Eustace. All at once, as the thought struck him, he ceased crying. It seemed to cost him as little effort to stop as it costs a dog to wake out of sleep. "They didn't mean to hurt each other."

The disaster that had overtaken their remedial measures was so present to him that he forgot the almost equally painful situation those measures had been meant to relieve, and thought of the previous relationship of the shrimp and the anemone as satisfactory to both.

"But they *were* hurting each other," remarked Hilda. "Anyhow the anemone was eating the shrimp, if you call that hurting."

Eustace could see no way out of this. His mind had no power to consider an unmixed evil, it was set upon happiness. With Hilda's ruthless recognition of an evil principle at the back of the anemone affair his tears started afresh.

"Now don't be a cry-baby," Hilda not at all unkindly admonished him. "There's Gerald and Nancy Steptoe coming, nasty things! If you stand still a minute," she went on, preparing with the hem of her blue frock to renew the assault upon his face, "they'll think it's only the wind."

The appeal to Eustace's pride was one Hilda tried only for form's sake; she thought it ought to weigh with him, but generally, as she knew, it made him irritable.

"I want to go and talk to Nancy," he announced. His attitude to other children was tinged with a fearful joy, altogether unlike his sister's intolerant and hostile demeanour. "Gerald's left her by herself again: he's climbing up the cliffs, look, and she daren't go."

"What do you want to talk to her for?" asked Hilda, a trifle crossly. "It's her fault, she shouldn't have let him."

"She can't stop him," said Eustace. His voice had a triumphant ring, due partly to his knowledge of the Steptoes' private concerns and partly, as Hilda realised, to a feeling of elation at the spectacle of Gerald's independence. This spirit of rebellion she resolved to quench.

"Come along," she said authoritatively, snatching his hand and whirling him away. "You know," she continued, with an exaggeration of her grown-up manner, "you don't really want to talk to Nancy. She's stuck-up, like they all are. Now we'll see what's happened to the pond. Perhaps we shall be in time to save it."

They scampered across the sands, Eustace hanging back a little and trying to wave to the lonely Nancy, who, deserted by her daring and lawless brother, had begun to dig herself a castle. Now that they seemed to be out of harm's way Hilda stopped and looked back. They could just see the ground plan of Nancy's fortress, which she had marked out on the sand with a spade and which was of an extravagant extent.

"She'll never get that done," Hilda remarked. "They're al-

ways the same. They try to make everything bigger than anybody else, and then they leave it half done and look silly."

"Should we go and help her?" suggested Eustace. Nancy looked very forlorn, labouring away at the outer moat of her castle.

"No," Hilda replied. "She can do it quite well herself, or she could if Gerald would have come away from those cliffs where he's no business to be and may very likely cause an avalanche."

"I want to go," cried Eustace, suddenly obstinate.

"I say you can't," said Hilda half teasingly.

"I will, I want to!" Eustace almost screamed, struggling to get free. Bent like a bow with the effort, his feet slipping from under him, his hat off, and his straight fair hair unpicturesquely rumped, he looked very childish and angry. Hilda kept him prisoner without much difficulty.

Some three and a half years older than Eustace, she was a good deal taller and the passion and tenacity of her character had already left its mark on her heart-shaped, beautiful face. Her immobility made a folly of Eustace's struggles; her dark eyes looked scornfully down.

"Diddums-wazzums," she at last permitted herself to remark. The phrase, as she knew it would, drove her brother into a frenzy. The blood left his face; he stiffened and stopped struggling, while he searched his mind for the most wounding thing to say.

"I want to play with Nancy," he said at last, averting his eyes from his sister and looking small and spiteful. "I don't want to play with you. I don't ever want to play with you again. I don't love you. You killed the shrimp and you killed the anemone" (he brought this out with a rush; it had occurred to him earlier to taunt Hilda with her failure, but a generous scruple had restrained him), "and you're a murderer."

Hilda listened to the beginning of the speech with equanimity; her features continued to reflect disdain. Then she saw that Nancy Steptoe had stopped digging and could both see and hear what was passing. This unnerved her; and the violence and venom of Eustace's attack touched her to the quick. The words were awful to her. An overwhelming conviction came to her that he did not love her, and that she was a murderer. She turned away, with great ugly sobs that sounded like whooping-cough.

"Then go," she said.

Eustace did not go at once. Hilda always stooped when she was in trouble; he watched the bent figure making its way back to the scene of their pond-making. She lurched, walking uncertainly with long uneven strides, and she did not seem to notice where she was putting her feet, for twice she stumbled over a projecting stone. The outburst over, Eustace's anger had melted away; he wanted to follow Hilda and make it up. In such matters he had no pride; apology came easily to him, and he regretted intensely everything that he had said. But he didn't go. Hilda wouldn't have forgiven him; he would have to undergo her silence and her disapproval and the spectacle of her suffering which she would try to control but would not try to hide. He could not bear being disapproved of, and though he had a weakness for comforting people it withered away in the presence of Hilda's implacable and formidable grief. He had lost his wish to play with Nancy; the desire to have his own way rarely survived the struggle it cost him to get it. But he obscurely felt that he was committed to a line of action and must go through with it.

Trailing his spade he walked awkwardly across the sands to Nancy, and, arriving at a respectful distance, put up his disengaged hand to take off his hat. This polite gesture missed completion, however, for the hat was still lying where it had fallen in the course of his altercation with Hilda. A look of surprise crossed his face and, with hand still upraised, he gazed aloft, as though he expected to see the hat suspended above his head.

Nancy laughed. "Good morning, Eustace," she said.

Eustace advanced and shook hands formally with her. Dainty, his nurse, Miss Minney, had called her, and the word suited her well. Eustace often wanted smoothing down, but never more than at this moment. His blue jersey had worked up and was hanging about him in ungainly folds, one sock was on the point of coming down, his face was flushed and tearful and his whole appearance presented a sharp contrast to Nancy's. He was the more aware of this because Nancy, her pink-and-white complexion, her neatness and coolness and the superior way she wore her clothes, had often been held up as a model to himself and his sister.

"Good-morning, Nancy," he said. His voice, in addressing strangers, had a peculiar and flattering intimacy; he seemed to find a secret pleasure in pronouncing the name of the person to

whom he was speaking, as though it was a privilege to utter it. "Would you like me to help you with your castle? I'll go on digging and you can just pat it down," he added heroically.

Nancy accepted this chivalrous offer, thanking him briefly. One reason why Eustace liked her was that she never made a fuss. If she was crossed or disappointed she took it silently, like a grown-up person; she did not turn herself inside out and call up all the resources of her personality. And if pleased she still kept a kind of reserve, as though the present moment's gratification was slight compared to those she had had and would have. Four years older than Eustace, she already possessed an experience, additions to which were classified and examined instead of treated on their own merits as isolated prodigies and visitations of Heaven. She was not at all informal or domestic: she had standards.

"What made Hilda so bately just now?" she presently inquired.

'Bately' was a word from the outside world, the world of day-schools and organised games with which Nancy was familiar. Bately: Eustace's father, who disliked slang, had protested against it, and his aunt had forbidden him to use it. Whatever Hilda might be she was not that.

"She wasn't bately," he said slowly.

"Well, what was she then?" demanded Nancy. "I saw her pulling you about, and she went away kicking up no end of a din."

Eustace pondered. If he should say that he had been unkind to Hilda, Nancy would laugh at him, in her polite, incredulous way. He was always acutely conscious of having to live up to her; that was one reason, among others, why he liked being with her. He wanted to make a good impression. But how could he do that without sacrificing his sister's dignity, which was dear to him and necessary to his sense of their relationship?

"She was very much upset," he said at last.

Nancy nodded sagely, as though she understood what Eustace had left unexpressed and respected his reticence. Sunning himself in the warmth of her hardly won approval, and feeling he had done his best for Hilda, Eustace let his sister and her troubles slip out of his mind. He redoubled his exertions and soon, to the accompaniment of a little desultory conversation, a large mound,

unmistakably castellated, began to rear itself in the midst of Nancy's plot.

Eustace took a pride in seeing it grow, but Nancy—beyond seconding his efforts with a few negligent taps—seemed content to resign the task to him. He is only an infant, she thought, in spite of his engaging manners.