

THE HALF-BROTHERS.

BY THE AUTHORS OF THE O'HARA TALES.

LUCY HAWKINS, at sixteen, was the belle, if not the beauty, of her little sea-washed village on the coast of Kent. Other girls might boast a more perfect shape and handsomer features; but her effect, her expression, or—if a fashionable French word may, with allowances, be applied to a lowly maiden—her *tournure* eclipsed them all. She was also celebrated for a vivacity of manner and conversation unusual amongst young females of her class; nay, in the opinions of a numerous circle of good judges, who constantly enjoyed her company and discourse, Lucy Hawkins deserved to be termed witty.

Her mother kept the post-office of the village, together with a general huckster's shop, and a hotel in one of her out-houses for very humble wanderers or sojourners—beds threepence per night. Upon a large deal chest, the good dame's flour-store, which stood under her shop window, opposite to her counter, hard-worked labourers, employed in the neighbourhood, would sit and eat their four penny-worth of bread and cheese, and drink their half pint of small-beer, by way of the morning's or afternoon's meal; and Lucy generally served them, or else stood by while they were served, and, at the same time, her good humour materially helped to give zest to their meagre breakfast or dinner. At the upper end of the counter was a rush-bottomed, curiously-legged, old oak chair, a fixture, put

forward for any chatty neighbour or visitor who might like an hour's gossiping; and since its establishment it had, indeed, seldom been left empty, as was indicated, even during its leisure moments, by a little round cavity worn in the tiled floor, just at the spot where its successive occupants necessarily rested their heels. And with the revellers on the chest, and the numerous patrons of this oak chair, to say nothing of ordinary customers and her own particular friends, Lucy became quite a public character, and, as has been hinted, quite a favourite. The poor people, who, towards night, crept through the shop to their straw beds over the hen-house in the yard, also shared her sparkling conversation, and acknowledged its cheery influence.

And there were other visitors who also admitted her attractions, though it would have been better for Lucy if we could limit her encomiastic friends to those already mentioned. Over one department of the manifold concern she had absolute sway; her mother did not know how to read hand-writing, and, considering the frequency of almost illegible superscriptions on the backs of letters, the deputation of authority alluded to became a matter of prudence, if not of necessity. At the inquiry of every claimant for letters "to be left till called for," it was Lucy, therefore, who always unlocked the little rude deal box—about the size and much in the shape of a salt-box—which, clumsily nailed against the wooden pane with the slit in the shop window, formed the whole material of the post-office branch of the establishment.

Many officers of the preventive-service, although they had abundance of unemployed men to go to Mrs. Hawkins's shop in their stead, would call in every morning to ask for

their letters ; and at different hours of their idle day return to purchase a quarter of an ounce of Scotch snuff, or something else of which they could have less use, such as a row of pins, a yard of tape, or a reel of thread. In fact, it became evident that three of them were rivals for the smiles of Lucy Hawkins.

Two of the three soon ensured to themselves however any thing but her smiles. For offences separately received at their hands, she invariably left the shop whenever they entered it ; and as Lucy's conduct was not a mere show of female anger, they absented themselves, and gave up their unmanly pursuit. The third, whose visits were still received, was more seriously in love with Lucy than either of his friends ; but, whether from a nicer sense of honour, or that the fate of the others had taught him a lesson, Lieut. Stone did not lightly or hastily tell her so. Much younger than his rivals, perhaps he was more romantic, and, particularly since Lucy's late specimen of self-assertion, would not indulge his admiration with a view to any mean indulgence of it. And, in fact, when, after sitting in the shop, upon the flour-chest, or in the old chair, day after day for more than six months, he at last whispered his sentiments to Lucy, the declaration sounded seriously and respectfully to her ear, and, she concluded, could be made only in one hope—that of obtaining her hand, with the due consent of father and mother.

The scene must now be very abruptly changed to the reader, with a breach of the three unities of time, place, and action.

Twelve years after Lucy Hawkins accepted the suit of her chosen lover, we enter a small wooden house, indeed a very poor shed, in another little sea-coast hamlet, many

miles distant from her native one. The walls of its only sitting-room, a kitchen, are bare; the floor is tiled; and the few articles of indispensable furniture are old, common, and crazy: and yet the poor apartment looks clean, or, to use an humble but expressive and very English word, tidy. A woman, as ill-clad as her house is ill-appointed, but, like it, tidy too, sits on a stool teaching a sturdy, sun-burnt boy of seven years to read out of a *Reading Made Easy*. She seems about forty, but may be much younger than she looks, for her composed features would suggest long acquaintance with misfortune—the often successful anticipator of time's utmost efforts to destroy. A half-finished female dress, of materials too costly, and of shape too fashionable to be destined to the use of the lowly occupant of the lowly abode, lies, together with the implements of woman's industry, upon a table at her side, hinting the mode of pursuit by which she earns scanty bread for her young pupil and herself.

The task is over, and Billy is kissed and called a good boy: and while his mother combs his yellow hair in smooth and equal portions towards either temple—"There, my king," she says; "and now, where is brother to take you out to play?"

"The naughty great boys were *quarrelling* Charley on the beach, mother, when he sent Billy home to his task to be rid of them."

"And what game did they quarrel over, Billy?"

"No ga-om, mother; but Dick Saunders called Charley a bad name."

"Tell mother the bad name, my man."

"Billy caunt—he doesn't know it now, mother."

Their conversation was interrupted by the quick entrance of Charley himself. The moment his mother saw him, she uttered an alarmed cry. His clenched hands were thrust into his trowsers' pockets; he frowned, for the first time in his life his mother had seen him do so; his lips quivered; tears glazed his eyes; his face, nay, his forehead and ears flamed scarlet, and blood trickled down his cheeks. Obviously, he had been fighting a hard battle, but, as obviously, was the victor. The boy was about twelve.

"Let Billy go play at the door, and I'll tell you, mother," he said, after she had addressed many anxious inquiries to him.

She led the little fellow out, and shut the door upon herself and Charley. He dropt in a chair, flung his arms over the table, laid his face upon them, and burst into a furious fit of tears.

"Naughty Dick Saunders has hurt you, Charley, mother's darling!" she cried, approaching him.

"No—not as well as I have hurt *him*—the storyteller! the puppy!" sobbed Charles. "Mother, Dick Saunders spoke ill of me, and of you."

"What did he say, Charley?"

"I can't repeat it after him—I won't. But, mother, I be old enough to ask you what I'm going to ask—Was Master Turner, who died last year, Billy's father?"

"To be sure he was, Charley." She grew uneasy.

"And your husband?"

"Yes."

"And *my* father too?"

She changed colour, and dropt her eyes beneath the deep glance of her child.

“ Now, Charley, I know what they said of you and me ; and the time is indeed come for me to speak to you of what nearly concerns you.”

“ Did Dick Saunders tell no story, mother?” interrupted Charley, sitting upright, and again unconsciously scruti- nizing her face. She raised her eyes, met his for an in- stant, and then sank back in her chair, covering her features with her hands, and weeping dolefully.

“ I ask pardon, mother,” said the generous and hitherto gentle boy, as he gained her side, and put his arms round her neck: “ you always loved me, and I shall always love you, let them say what they will of us. Kiss Charley, mother, won’t you?”

Fondly, almost wildly she embraced him, and resumed. “ No, Charley—Master Turner, my husband, was *not* your father: stop a moment.” She stepped into her little bed- room ; returned with a small, oval, red-leather case ; placed it in his hand ; sat down ; averted her head ; began to move the work on the table, and would vainly hide her continued tears, as she added, “ Open that, and you will know more of your father.”

While he obeyed her commands, Charley recollected that he had more than once detected his mother weeping over the little red-leather case. When the miniature met his eye, the boy started.

“ My father was a ship’s captain!” he cried.

“ He was an officer in the king’s navy,” she answered.

“ And a gentleman, mother?”

“ His commission made him one, Charley ; but he would have been a true gentleman without it.”

“ And he married you before Master Turner married you, mother?”

“Charley, your father and I never were married.”

A pause ensued. Charley's features betrayed a bitter and a fierce inward combat, as his glance still fixed on the miniature.

“Is he dead?” he at length asked.

“I hope not, but I am not sure. Sometimes I think one thing, sometimes another. Listen, my king. I was very young when I met your father; and I wondered, and many others wondered what he could see in me to love. I was his inferior in every way. To be sure, my poor mother had managed to keep me at good schools till I was a great girl, and perhaps this made me something in his eyes. Then, when we began to keep company, with father's and mother's consent, he taught me, like a master, himself, a great many things that improved my mind and my manners, ay, and my heart too; but I am not going on with my story. We were to be married at the end of two years. Before the first year came round he was ordered from the blockade-service to a ship, at only a few hours' notice. He ran down to our shop, and showing the letter, prayed mother to let us be made man and wife that very evening. She would not hear of it, saying I was too young, and did not know my own mind, and would not know how to behave as his wife. He begged and prayed once again, and cried tears, and went on his knees; she held firm to her word. But, alas! Charley, it had been doing better if she had not held so firm to it, or else not have left us alone to take leave of each other that evening. Crying and sobbing, in sorrow and in love, we forgot ourselves, Charley; and next day, ay, before it was day, your father left our village, and I have never seen him since.”

“But he has sent letters to you, mother?”

“ I got none, if he did: though I believe he did, and that an enemy kept them from my hands. A very short time after he left us, my father died, my mother grew poor, and we were turned out of our comfortable little house, not being able to pay our rent. The shop was re-opened by a woman and her daughter who bore me no good will, and on your father's account too. He had paid some compliments to the daughter before he met me, and they blamed me for taking him from them. And—God forgive me if I wrong either mother or daughter—but I do fear that letters from your father to me, and from me to him, were stopt by the new keepers of our post-office. Well, Charley, you were born while my mother and I lived in a very poor way, trying to support ourselves with our needles, and keep out of the work-house. Your father's silence almost broke my heart. I did not suspect foul play about the letters then; 'tis only lately people gave me some hints, and all I could think was that he had forsaken us both, my king. Mother died too, and you and I were left quite alone, Charley. Years after, when, try as I would or could, we were getting worse and worse off, Master Turner came from his village to ours, on business, and knowing my whole story, asked me to marry him. He was a man well to do in the world at that time, and a kind man too; and so, after giving up all other hopes, I thought, Charley, that, even for your sake, I ought not to refuse a comfortable home and comfortable living. But it seemed as if every one was to have ill-luck with me. Good Master Turner began to grow poor from that very day, till last year, when he died, leaving us as badly off as he found us; and that's the whole story, Charley; only, here are you and I

living alone again, with your little half-brother, Billy, to keep us company."

"Well; and I be glad of his company, mother," said Charley: "I always loved little Billy for his own sake, and because he loved me"—(the mutual affection of the boys was indeed very remarkable) "and now, though, as you say, he turns out to be only my half-brother, I'll love him better for his father's sake, who was a friend to you when you wanted a friend. But we must open the door and let him in."

Billy's voice had been heard calling on Charles to run down with him to the beach, and see the grand three-masted ship that was passing but a little way out, and, people said, seemed about to send a boat ashore. Ere Charles went to the door, he held out the miniature, and asked, "May I see it often again, mother?"

"Keep it,—'tis your own, Charley—here"—passing a ribbon through the loop at its top, "hang it round your neck."

As his mother secured it, he once more felt her tears dropping fast on his head, and looking up into her face, he stole his arms around her.

"Go, now, mother's darlings," as hand in hand they left her humble threshold; "but, Charley, do not stray out far on the sands: it will be a spring-tide, I fear, and the breeze comes fresh from the sea."

Still hand in hand they proceeded on their walk, Billy unusually communicative, and Charles unusually silent. Indeed the younger boy remarked his brother's taciturnity, and taxed him with it. They met groups of their former playmates in the village-street, whom the child wished to join; but Charles, chucking him closer to his side, passed

them by, knitting his brow and holding up his head. On the shingles appeared other groups, and the young misanthrope would not descend to the water's edge until he had proceeded several hundred yards above their position.

It was a beautiful spring day. The breeze lashed the waves into a sportive fury. Sun and cloud, light and shade, alternated their effects over the wide bosom of the sea, streaking it with gold and pea-green, with dark purple or deep blue. Now a distant sail was a white speck on the horizon, now a spot of dark, dotting a clear sky. The three-master, of which little Billy had spoken, lay-to, about a mile from shore. Charles knew her to be an East-Indiaman. His brother urged him to approach her as closely as the sands permitted. Still wrapt up in his own thoughts and feelings, Charles silently stepped down the shingles, looking jealously around to note if they were alone.

Behind him, as he began to move towards the waves, was a low line of cliff, forming, at a particular point, a jutting platform, from the outward edge of which the continuation of the cliff swept, like a buttress, to the shingles. Before him stretched the strand, to nearly the distance of half a mile, where it was met by an irregular circle of black rocks, closely wedged together, and enclosing the last patch of sand visible even at low tide. Charles had not intended to approach this spot; but as he walked in an oblique direction from it, some straggling boys appeared coming against him, and he hastily led his little charge to the convenient screen of the tall rocks.

The tide had for some time been coming in. Often before, however, Charles had ventured farther out, when it was more advanced, and returned to shore with only wet

feet and a splashing. The rocks could not at any point be easily scaled, so high and broad was their barrier; nor did they admit of egress into the sandy area they girded, save at a particular spot, sea-ward, where, some feet from their base, appeared a narrow fissure, still difficult of access. Charles therefore walked round them until he gained this opening; then, assisting his little brother to climb up to it, the two boys soon stood upon a projection inside the rocky belt, and turned their faces towards the sea.

They could perceive, by a bustle on the deck of the *Indiaman*, now so near to them, that a boat would soon be lowered from her side. They looked out, much interested, until the boat lightly touched the tossing waves near the vessel's prow, and became strongly manned, as if to put off for shore. Still, however, the men rested on their oars, and seemed waiting for some other person to descend. And, in a mood that sympathized with the scene, Charles continued to watch the boat, dancing to and fro, and sometimes almost jumping out of the water; for the breeze grew stiffer, and the waves rougher. Half an hour he stood motionless, disregarding, for the first time in his life, the prattle of the little boy at his side. At last the individual for whom the boat waited, clad in blue and white, and gold lace, to Billy's great delight, jumped in amongst his men, stood up, at their head, pointed to shore, and was rapidly rowed towards it.

For some time the near roar of waters had been ringing in Charles's ear, but he made light of the warning, for he confidently argued from experience, whenever his thoughts reverted to the matter, that there was still sufficient time to return to the shingles with scarce

a wet shoe. But he did not reckon that the spot of sand, along with which he now stood enclosed, was much higher than the outer sands which stretched to the bases of the rocks. He did not reckon that the tide, at a certain period of its flow, after turning a near point of land, usually ran with almost the rapidity of a mill-stream, against the right-hand segment of the barrier, and then, directed by its curve, inundated in a trice the previously open space between it and the shingles. Above all, he did not remember what his mother had hinted at parting; for, indeed, her omen proved true; it was a spring-tide.

The ship's boat, still seen at a distance, glanced athwart the patch of sea revealed through the fissure at which the boys looked out. More alive, after its disappearance, to the unusual noise of the waters, Charley took his brother's hand to lead him home by the way they had come. To his consternation, a fiercely-crested wave leaped into their faces through the narrow opening, drenching both to the skin. He let go Billy's hand, and sprang up to the top of the circular wall of rocks. A foamy sea tossed all around him. His eye caught the gallant boat, about a quarter of a mile distant. He screamed to it; jumped down to his little brother; dragged him up to the spot he had just quitted, and screamed again. There was a little cavity, formed by the irregular junction, at their sharp extremities, of the rocks, and in this he placed the now bewildered and weeping child, to preserve him from being dashed inward by the quickly increasing sea; and clinging himself to the highest pinnacle he could grasp, once more he wildly hailed the boat.

Most probably he had now caught its notice. It put

round and pulled towards him ; but soon seemed deterred from venturing too near the dangerous rocks.

“Oh God!—oh, mother, mother! your Billy! Mother’s darling! *he* at least will be drowned, though I may swim till they pick me up—and all *my* fault!—but no, no!” He pulled off his jacket and vest, and tore his shirt into long strips.—“No! he shall not!—Come, Billy! I will tie you to my back ; never fear, my king—and see if I don’t swim like a fish for you!”

The child, having heard and noted all his words and actions, had stopped crying, and, as if struck with Charles’s noble conduct and sentiments, and unconsciously sympathizing them, answered: “I won’t, Charley, I won’t;—I should sink you, and we should only be drowned together, then, and no one left with mother.”

All this while breakers had been dashing from without nearly up to the summits of the rocks at the opposite sweep of the circle, and as Charles eagerly, indeed violently renewed his entreaties, they at last came leaping and plunging up to its very edge, like dark, white-maned war-horses, trying to rear and paw over some high and well-guarded embankment. Once again he hoarsely cried out to the boat. It was nearer to him, but still seemed cautious of actual approach. He turned for the last time to Billy, and seized him in his arms to compel him to do his bidding. The riband which held his father’s miniature round his neck snapped in the exertion ; the miniature itself was rolling outwardly into the surf ; he snatched at it, and secured it, but lost his balance, and the next instant was kicking among the breakers.

The captain of the East-Indiaman had witnessed the

greater part of the scene between the young brothers, and, as he saw Charles tumble from the rocks, gallantly ordered his men to dare a good deal, and pull towards the spot where the boy had sunk. Presently Charley reappeared, swimming stoutly; not for the boat, however, but back again to the now almost invisible rocks. The captain and his men called to him, but he did not heed them. It has been mentioned that when the boys walked out to the sands, they directly turned their backs upon a platform formed in a low line of cliff. At that moment, not only the platform and its rugged buttress-base, but the shingles beneath, were perfectly dry. Now the raging surf of a spring-tide, excited by a stiff breeze, foamed up to the level of the former: and almost simultaneously with Charley's reappearance, a woman, screaming loudly, descended the difficult passage from the brow of the cliff, and gained the slippery shelf. Many people followed her to the top line of the precipice, but no one ventured to her side. Her cries reached the young swimmer, through all the roar of the sea, and he redoubled his vain efforts to reach his little brother. But very soon exertion became useless. At one enraged and reinforced charge of the breakers, the area enclosed by the rocky circle, hitherto little intruded on, was inundated, and no part of the black barrier-line remained visible, except that formed by the pinnacles amid which the child stood wedged: a curling chain of foam supplied its place. And now, his mother from the shore, his brother from the sea, and the captain and his men from their boat, witnessed the conduct of the little sufferer. He had been sitting; he stood up: a breaker struck him; he staggered: another came; he fell, disappeared: was still seen, however, upon a point of rock,

raising his hands, and clapping them over his head, until at the third blow the little fellow became engulfed in the whirling waters.

The boat was now very near to Charles; and, at last, seemingly attentive to the remonstrance of its crew, he turned, and languidly swam towards its side.

“What the deuce has the young grampus fished up between his teeth?” said the captain, as he assisted in reaching out an oar; “a boiled crab, I reckon; though, where they got a fire to boil it, at the bottom of this surf, is more than I can imagine.”

Charles was dragged into the boat, and without a word or a cry fell stupified upon its bottom. The miniature dropped from his unclenched teeth; the captain took it up, opened it, and startled his men by uttering a loud exclamation. Then he stooped to Charley's face, and peered into it; then glanced to the cliff; and, finally, ordering every oar to pull for the shingles, he knelt on one knee, raised Charley's head to the other; and his crew were still more surprised to see their bluff captain embrace the almost senseless lad, kiss his cheeks and forehead, and weep over him profusely, though in silence.

The boat had not shot far, when little Billy floated ahead. The captain gently, though hastily, put Charles down, and with much energy assisted in picking up the child, who soon lay stretched beside his half-brother, rescued indeed from the sea, but, it seemed evident, quite dead. Still the captain cried, “Pull, men, pull!”

Vigorously and skilfully obeying his orders, they ran the lively boat upon the shingles, a good distance below the point at which the low cliff gradually dipped to their surface. The mother flew down to meet her children and

their unknown friends. The anxious crowd followed her. She received Charley from the captain's arms; a sailor followed, holding Billy, wrapped in the captain's jacket, to his bosom. At her first word the elder boy opened his eyes; after straining him to her heart she flew to his brother. No word had effect upon him. The captain called out for a surgeon: the village practitioner and the blockade surgeon were both at hand. They caused the child to be conveyed into a neighbouring cottage, and there, in the presence of the mother and the captain, promptly engaged in all the usual measures for restoring animation: but all failed. They repeated their exertions, still without effect; and at length, pronouncing Billy to be a corse, left the cottage.

Charles had been stretched across the foot of the bed upon which, wrapped in blankets, lay his little half-brother. At first he did not comprehend his situation, or notice the occurrences around him. Now, however, he seemed to hear the departing words of the surgeons, for, raising himself upon his elbow, he gazed first into his mother's face, as she sat in silent anguish by the bedside, and then he tried to move upward towards Billy. While making this effort, the captain, gently laying his hand on the mother's shoulder, asked to speak aside with her. She arose, in the languid indifference of grief, and followed him into a corner of the room, out of view of the boat. "Lucy!" was the captain's only word, soothingly whispered at her ear. She drew back, looked up into his face, and was caught in his arms. A brief explanation proved that her suspicions of her revengeful rival at the village post-office were well-founded. While, from the suppression of the captain's letters to her, Lucy had believed him cruel and

faithless, the holding back, also, of her letters to him had caused her sincere lover to conclude that she was no better than a village-coquette, who, the moment he left her presence, forgot him, and insulted his memory and his devotion in the smiles of a new admirer; perhaps in the smiles of more than one. Hence, after her seeming silence of many years, he had proudly struggled to give up Lucy Hawkins for ever; and though, since their parting, he could often have returned to her village, he would not so far humiliate himself. Some inquiries, however, he condescended to make by a confidential person sent for the purpose, merely with the view of ascertaining if Lucy was alive or dead,—for death alone, he argued, could explain her supposed conduct. About the very time his emissary arrived in the village, she had become the envied wife of the rich Master Turner; and this intelligence necessarily confirmed his former angry resolutions.

The captain and Lucy yet spoke, when Charles's voice sounded shrill and joyfully from the bed; "Yes, Billy, yes!—'t is Charley! Billy!—mother's darling!" They stepped round to the bedside. He had crept under the blankets, and clasped the child close to his bosom; and now, indeed, the efforts of the surgeons, although despaired of by themselves, began to yield a good result.

"He would not die, to let you say I killed him, mother," said Charles; laughing through his tears.

"The child lives, by Heavens!" cried the captain.

That day Captain Stone was married to the woman of his early choice; and having despatched before evening the trifling business which first called him to shore, he conveyed his wife to his ship, together with her two sons, and pursued his voyage.