STRAW HATS

CHAPTER I

ORIGIN AND CLASSICAL HISTORY

The origin of what is known as a "Straw Hat" is lost in the mists of antiquity.

Ambiguous references to what may have been hats of vegetable materials are to be found in the works of almost all ancient writers, but very little that is specific can be discovered. Perhaps one reason for the paucity of information on this subject may be that the homemade hats of plaited straws or rushes were probably worn only by the common people. With society, as it existed in early days, if such were the case, the matter would be considered almost too vulgar for the classical writers to mention.

Doubtless in the earliest stages of human development any kind of convenient material was utilized by primeval man in the endeavour to keep his head or body warm or cool as the case might require.

Now the mere fact of the shelter afforded by trees would create some inducement towards using leaves for covering the body, for one may assume that even before vegetable products were gathered and used, say, as thatch, for collective shelter, some of them were adopted for individual protective purposes.

The earliest reference to such is the well-known account of the "aprons of fig leaves" mentioned in the third chapter of Genesis. This primitive method of clothing was soon followed by the use of skins (as noted
later in the same chapter), but even in this record the vegetable product was used by man before that of animals, and shows in a most unmistakable, even if allegorical, manner, the natural trend of all development, viz., that articles easiest to procure are those that are first used.

It is, therefore, not unfair to assume that the manipulation of vegetable fibres, such as leaves, rushes, straws and other similar products, was really the earliest textile operation. That once conceded, it is no long step to the use of the "plaited" article as a head covering.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica, in its articles on "Costume" and "Hats" states that the "modern hat can be traced back to the Petasus worn by the ancient Romans when on a journey"; and similar hats, known as Kausia, were also used by the ancient Greeks on like occasions.

The Greek Kausia and the Roman Petasus are described as "hats of a pliant material which could be bent down at the sides like that worn by Atalanta."

La Croix, a French writer on the subject, assures us that the early Romans and Franks "sought Bast and
Straw of which to make them hats,” and there is an antique statue of Mercury in the Vatican at Rome, which has for head covering a hat of a “wide-awake” nature, sculptured in close imitation of a finely plaitted straw.

The Goddess Hera (the Grecian name for the Roman Juno), Queen of Olympus, is depicted on ancient vases, coins and statues wearing a Stephanos [one of the statues, the original of which was by Praxiteles (350 B.C.), representing Hera Teleia standing, is known to moderns by copies to be found in the Vatican and other museums]. Pausanias (c. 160 B.C.) speaking of the coins of Argos, specifically describes Hera as wearing a Stephanos. This was a head covering consisting only of a crown, similar in shape to a modern Turkish fez inverted, of the same breadth and height all round, and was made of various vegetable products.

In the British Museum is to be seen a small terra-cotta figure seated wearing the above sketched Stephanos in which the plaitting marks of coarse vegetable fibres are very distinct. This is probably the earliest extant record, in the plastic art, of a straw hat.

“Wicker work (poloi kalathoi) was also used by the ancient Greeks to make brim-less hats.” (Gerard. Antike Bildwerke.)

The ancient Etruscans wore what was known as a Tutulus, a brimless hat with a high pointed centre to the crown; and a broad brimmed hat
similar to the *Petasus*, but with a pointed top like the *Tutulus*.

Etruria covered the district now occupied by the Italian straw plait and hat makers, but while there is an extreme likelihood, from the shape of the hat in the accompanying sketch, that the denizens of this fertile champaign, producing as it does, and probably did, unlimited materials that could be plaitted, made these hats of straw, there is no definite information as to their being constructed of any vegetable fibres.

Another very important link of classical interest with the remote past is shown in the two sketches of hats and bonnets as worn by the ancient inhabitants of ill-fated Pompeii.

The mural decorations of this long-buried city illustrate in a far more cogent manner than any other known examples, the probable actual appearance of the people who lived there before its catastrophe, and
the hat shown on the head of Penelope is a model that has been imitated during the last thirty-five years. The little knob on the top is, however, quite novel.

The other example from Pompeii is from a comic fresco in which two men, dressed as women, are having an altercation, and here the artist has not only shown the lines which indicate the ridges of a woven vegetable fibre hat, but this painting provides the first known drawing of a Bonnet. Note the tilt at which it is worn, and

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**Fig. 4**
HAT WORN BY PENELlope

**Fig. 5**
BONNET

the portion cut out at base to admit the neck, and also the absolute resemblance to what is known as a "Granny" Bonnet.

A very famous writer of antiquity (perhaps the one best known, except Caesar, to all scholars of Latin), Virgil, makes allusion in his *Pastorals* to the "plaitting of osiers and willows."

Probably there is no race of men that has so closely maintained to the present time its ancient forms of clothing, as have the Arabs; and they occasionally wear a hat made of twisted bands of straw similar to a beehive. They are the only Moslems that do, and
there is no trace of any other people of that religion 
wearing a similar head covering.

All this evidence from the Graeco-Roman and other 
ancient sources proves that the making in some way of 
straw hats was fairly general even in the earliest times 
in the countries of Asia Minor and south-eastern Europe, 
but some writers on the subject favour the claims of 
the Black Forest of Germany as having been the birth-
place of the industry. This, of course, may be so, 
although no Germanic or Teutonic writers of equal 
antiquity have handed down such direct evidence as 
that of the Graeco-Romans.

But it seems a little invidious for any special part of 
the world to make such a claim, for doubtless the weaving 
of vegetable fibres was not confined to any particular 
area, but that primeval man all over the world practised 
the operation for his own needs.

There are no British records of straw hats until 
A.D. 1459, when it is narrated that Sir John Fastolfe 
died possessed of "ij Strawen hattes"; the "Promtorium 
parvulorum" of about that date renders the "hatte of 
straw" as capedulum.

Spenser, Shakespeare and Thynne, brilliant luminaries 
of the Elizabethan period, all make allusions to the 
straw hat.

Spenser, the Poet Laureate of Good Queen Bess (who 
herself is said to have worn a straw hat that may still 
be seen at Hatfield House), quite early in the sixteenth 
century says—

"Some plaid with straws," etc.: 

while Thynne, about 1570, in his "Debate between 
Pride and Lowliness" writes of a man with 

"A straven hatte upon his head 
"The which was fastened underneath."
Shakespeare in *The Tempest* (Act IV, Scene 1) makes *Iris* say—

"You sunburned sicklemen, of August weary
Come hither from the furrow, and be merry;
Make holyday: your *rye straw hats* put on
And these fresh nymphs encounter every one
In country footing."

In *A Lover's Complaint*, the immortal bard still further emphasizes the use, which apparently was fairly general, of the straw hat—

"Upon her head a platted hive of straw
Which fortified her visage from the sun."

This passage is interesting first on account of the use of the word *hive*. This object, as used for beekeeping, was without doubt very familiar to Shakespeare, and therefore the maid's head covering, as it existed in the imagination of the poet, was probably similar to that worn by the Arabs mentioned previously, for she and they wore it as a protection against the sun's heat. Second, Shakespeare's spelling of the word "platted" was undoubtedly the method of spelling current at the time and was phonetic. (The author in the "Foreword" bases his reasons for using the double *T* in "plaitting" or "platter" in conjunction with the modern spelling of the word on this and other more recent well-known examples of literature co-eval with the birth of the trade in Great Britain.)

Ben Jonson, the Poet Laureate of James I, about 1630, in an epigram to Lady Mary Wroth, writes—

"He that saw you wear the wheaten hat," etc.

The inimitable diarist, Pepys, describes an actress at the Duke's Theatre as "dressed like a country maid with a straw hat on": and mentions that while staying at Hatfield, "The women (of the party) had pleasure
in putting on some Straw Hats, which are much worn in this country, which did become them mightily, but especially my wife!!"

It may be interesting at this point to mention a widely known subject, of which interpretations have been greatly at fault. One of Peter Paul Rubens’ best known paintings is entitled “La Dame au Chapeau de Poil.” The subject is of a lady wearing a large brimmed and somewhat high crowned hat adorned with a sweeping plume of feathers, and many writers on straw hats have endeavoured to show that the hat of the picture was made of straw, arguing that the word “Poil” in the title was an ancient form of the French word for straw, viz., “Paille.” It is true that some old Gaelic writers in mentioning the stalks of cereals have used various methods of spelling the equivalent for straw; “Pail,” “Paile” and “Paill” are to be found in sixteenth and seventeenth century books, but in no case has the word “Poil” ever been used, and quite rightly so, because this word means an entirely different thing, and is used to-day with the same spelling and for the same purpose as it was in the sixteenth century. “Poil” means “nap,” a raised “pile,” which can be obtained on various fabrics. This consists of a sufficient number of the loose ends of the staple, of which the material is woven or felted, being left on the surface, or afterwards raised by means of combs, etc., so as to form either a velvety richness on which the loose ends stand upright, or a glossy finish, like that obtained on a man’s top hat, where the loose ends are smoothed down. The real translation of the picture’s title is “The lady with a Pile hat,” in this case undoubtedly of some felted nature and of which the actual modern equivalent would be either a beaver, flamand or velour.

From this time onwards, as printing became more
general, allusions to straw hats became frequent, and, with the advent of periodicals of fashions, etc., for ladies, both letterpress and illustrations confirm their widespread use. Naturally detail began to be given, and the poet Gay (cir. 1714) in his Pastorals sings of

"My new straw hat, thus trimly lined with green."

In the *Ladies’ Dictionary* (1694) under the heading of "Apparel," straw hats are mentioned as among the things "necessary to feminine adornment."

Miss Constance Isherwood says that "Straw hats—became the rage among the reigning beauties of Queen Anne’s court and the early Georgian period."

*The Ladies’ Magazine* of the eighteenth century has many plates showing various styles of what are certainly straw hats, the design and manipulation of the straws in woven hats and the detail of the plait in sewn hats being very carefully and distinctly engraved.

These excerpts from ancient as well as more recent authorities all tend to show the widespread use of the straw hat, and prove that the term “straw” was, as it is now, a most comprehensive one, and one in no way entirely confined to the stalks of cereals.

But they also show that, although straw hats were made all over the Continent, etc., the work on them was purely individual and local. There were no recognized centres of manufacture or distribution, for, excepting the fact that some localities were more productive of suitable materials for plaiting than others, the making of straw hats was universal, and it is not until the sixteenth century that any reliable information is obtainable of special centres for straw hat production. According to Cesare Cantu, a well-known Italian historian, the manufacture of hats of straw in the neighbourhood of Florence, for distribution outside the locality,
can be traced back to the fourteenth century. This is probably quite true, but unfortunately the statement is not corroborated by any contemporaneous evidence. But in the year 1574, Signa, a village near Florence, was entitled "the original seat of the industry." (From a consular report.) It is, therefore, almost safe to declare that the commercial life of the straw hat began in the district of Florence, and here, probably, for the first time in history, were to be found gathered together in sufficiently large numbers to make their wares marketable, persons both male and female engaged in weaving straws into hats, or capelli, or in plaiting straws into braids, which were called paglia or plait.

From Tuscany to Piedmont is not a "far cry," and Coryat in his Crudities (a work published in 1611 and consisting of a series of observations made in a journey through Europe) says, "at many places in Piemont I observed most delicate strawen hats, which both men and women use in most places of that Province."

Again, Piedmont is not very distant from Lorraine, and it is from this latter district, which was the country of the birthplace of her mother, that Mary, Queen of Scots, is said to have brought platters to Scotland in 1552, and thus to have introduced the art to the British Isles.

Some writers on this subject, failing to discriminate between plait and hats, adduce many adverse arguments (see below) when the claim is made that the unfortunate queen established the trade in the coasts of Britain. These point to the undoubted fact that straw hats were made both in Scotland and England before her time. That, of course, is quite true, but what is not equally certain is whether the hats made in the British Isles before 1552 were hats woven in one piece, or hats made of plaitted braid sewn afterwards in some manner to
the required shape. In the old account of the transaction one reads that in Lorraine Mary noticed the people "profitably employed, some in plaitting straws and others in working (sic) the straw plait into hats." It is, therefore, evident that it was an established industry in Lorraine and that both operations were being carried on. One may also deduce that, while the weaving of hats may have been common in Scotland, the making of plait and the subsequent making into hats was a novelty to Mary, and, therefore, in the interests of her Scottish subjects, she endeavoured to promote a similar industry in which they also might be "profitably employed."

The late Mr. John Waller, of Luton, a member of one of the oldest families connected with the straw trade, after a careful and apparently unbiased investigation, says that the statement about Mary being the founder of the industry "can only be regarded as pleasing fiction"; and to support this quotes from Oldmixon's History of England (edition of 1724) "That the manufacture of straw plait had thriven for about 100 years in the neighbourhood of Hemel Hempstead and Dunstable." But from 1552 to 1624 is a long period, and one can easily imagine the natives of sunny Lorraine feeling none too homelike in "Caledonia, stern and wild." With the accession of James I (Mary's son) to the English throne, what could be more natural than the migration of these workers to more genial southerly temperatures, bringing with them their art? As James became king in 1603 there would have been plenty of time for the industry of making plait for sewing into hats being established between then and 1624, which would be exactly 100 years before Oldmixon's account! And speaking of the advent of the Lorrainers into Beds and Herts, Mr. Thomas George Austin, in
his book on the *Straw Hat and Bonnet trade of the Luton District*, writes, "It is said to be the true history of the introduction of the handicraft into England."

One must, therefore, come to the conclusion that the system of making hats from plait, as distinct from the weaving the hat in one piece, was introduced by Mary, Queen of Scots, to Scotland, and from thence the method came south, and for reasons which will be set out hereafter, settled itself in the regions of South Bedfordshire, North-east Hertfordshire, and East Buckinghamshire.