CHAPTER V
STRAW PLAIT AND PLAITING

HAVING briefly described the nature of, and method of preparation of various plaits and hoods, some detailed account of the method of working those which have largely contributed to the creation and augmentation of the Straw Hat Trade will be necessary.

The first plaits made were, as has already been said, of whole pieces of rush or straw. They were plainly plaitted without any attempt at producing what is termed a "head," i.e. the straws or rushes were simply folded over flatly at the edge of the plait. Plaits were made of varying numbers of "ends" or pieces of straw, from three to seven was probably the favourite scale. The "ends," let us say three, are fastened together by twisting in a fanlike manner, the right-hand one is first bent under towards the left in a flat fold at a widish angle, under the middle "end," this then becomes parallel to the left hand "end" which in its turn is folded under the now middle end towards the right, becoming consequently parallel to the right-hand "end"; this completes the operation, which to make lengths of plait is repeated ad libitum. The plait produced is now known as "3 ends plain."

To make a "head" on one edge of the plait, instead of folding flatly from the right, a "twist" or half turn is given to the "end" at the extreme edge and point of turn, before folding under the middle strand; as this always to a certain extent buckles the round pipe of straw or rush, a shell like effect is produced which greatly adds to the effectiveness
of the plait, and is called "Twist" or "Picot" edge.

To make "five ends" plait, five strands are required; these are also set out in a fan-like shape, but four of the ends lie parallel towards the right, and one only towards the left; the plaiting begins by turning with either the twisted or the flat fold, the right hand "end" under the "end" nearest to it, over the next one, and under the third, when the left hand "end" is turned under the one just brought from the right, which then becomes the left hand "end," again beginning with the now right hand "end" and repeating the operation as before. These two processes form the basis for all plaiting, and although any number of "ends" may be used up to the holding capacity of the plaitter and although any change of making the "head" may be adopted, the under and over method is common to all plaiting of braids and hoods. The demand for novelty has caused many variations to be created; the "Twist" head has been described, in addition there are the "one" "two" or "three" or even more "Purl" (or "Pearl") heads. A "Purl" is a double kind of "Twist" which may occur at every other head or greater intervals. This twist consists of two of the strands or split straws being turned spirally for a sufficient length to form a little half shell at the edge of the plait, the further length of the strand being plaited into the foot at the desired distance, giving to the finished braid, which is generally of a narrow width, a very pretty effect. Another variety of head which has different applications of the same principle is known as "Feather." This, although it can be made with whole straws, is generally, and is most effective, made with split straws, and its pattern is a loop or loops of a slightly curved nature formed on the edge of the plait by allowing the
right hand "end" or "ends" to miss one or more turns of plaitting, so that when at regular intervals it is, or they are, loosely brought into use, they will form a kind of scalloped edge to the plait.

There are also heads which are known by the number of times plaiting is missed to create a fancy edge. These vary from two to ten, and are made from a sufficient number of "ends" to leave the head of "Under-two" or "Under-ten" or intermediate numbers, as the case may be, with a sufficient "foot" to keep the plait firm for working; the resultant appearance of this method is a plain succession of parallel straws at the plaitting angle to the "foot," which gives, when sewn, the "foot" being covered, according to the medium used, an entirely "matt" or a brilliantly glossy surface. These "under" plaits can be made with any reasonable number of "ends," but they are seldom found plaitted with more than sufficient to produce the "under ten."

In order to preserve absolute regularity of length in these head straws, which are actually "in the air," they are turned over a suitable template, be it of bone, metal, or any thin hard wearing material; this is withdrawn as the plaitting progresses to the further stages of development, but in some cases, especially with split straws, which would not retain any regularity without some support, the template used is a strand of split straw of sufficient width for the number of "under heads," and is left in the plait to form a permanent strengthenener to the pattern. It is completely hidden from sight by the heads folded over it, and although in the wider plaits it is very undesirable, being extremely difficult to turn in small circles, in the narrow grades the objectionable features are more easily overcome.

In addition to these, there is the "saw" edge, a peculiarity of "Rustics," and of which, as its name
implies, one edge, or both edges, present that angular serration which is common to saws. There are also innumerable fancy edges, having as their foundation one or the other of these generic patterns.

The "Foot," or other part of the braid as distinct from the head, is made in so many ways that room forbids any detailed account: some plaits have none, and one of the most remarkable of this variety may be described. In "English Brilliant," a widish plait made of a varying number of ends, there is really no "foot," the plait, of split straws, being all head or pattern. The individuality of "Brilliant" is that once the turn is effected the split straw instead of laying flat across the pattern is made to stand on its edge, giving to the design a look similar to a honeycomb; this is probably the lightest in weight of any straw made plait.

These few types form the basis on which nearly all plaits are made by hand. There are, of course, many others in actual use, one not yet mentioned which, although plaited in the same way as ordinary flat head 7 end braid, is made with single strands of split straw. The result is a kind of chess board pattern, which shows alternate squares of the outside and the inside of the straw. This has a generic name of "split," and was one of the earliest developments of English plaiting. Naturally, it is very light in weight, and enjoyed a great sale for many years, being most suitable for "Granny" bonnets.

Other plaits have been made of what is called "Cordinette." This consists of two strands only, and is plaited one over the other in recurring fashion, so as to make a kind of narrow concertina. It was at one time used for making small bonnets, but its general application has been for the embellishment of some of the wider grades of plait.
The straw plaits of China, and especially Japan, are all made on the above lines, their extra beauty and lightness, combined with the width of straw possibilities, rendering them the successful rivals to our insular produce. In these Far Eastern lands many fancy digressions of plait making have been made, some of them of beautiful design and effect, but all of them embodying one or more of the methods already described as peculiar to hand plaiting, and generally speaking have been copies of patterns sent out from Europe.

The other branch of plait making that has now revolutionized the trade is that of machine made braids. Some few entirely straw plaits have been made by machine. A Luton inventor named Barrett designed a mechanical plaitter, which really did make fairly good whole straw plaits, but the invention came at a time when lightness was considered most essential, and the machine failed to do justice to either single or double split straws. Italy has for many years produced a straw plait woven with cotton or silk, of which there are many patterns, but which are all given the generic name of "Fiesole," from the original place of manufacture. This Italian plait of fine Tuscan straws has been in use for many years, 1840 is supposed to have been the date, and the plait was made on looms imported from Switzerland. Both Italy and Switzerland have since produced innumerable patterns of plaits in which straw is combined with one or more suitable weaving media. But all these machine-made patterns, although legion in number, and extending over more than three-quarters of a century, cannot compare as a straw hat success with the machine woven braids of horsehair, cotton, silk, viscose, hemp and other similar fibres that have emanated from Switzerland, Italy, Germany and Japan.
Probably the first machine-made braid (soon adopted and classified as "straw") was that known as "crinoline." This has as its basis horsehair, and is made both of hair alone and of hair mixed with many other fibres. The plain braid can be composed of odd numbers of strands of horsehair from five upwards, in series of numbers divisible by four, plus one; thus 17 ends, 21 ends, 25 ends, and so on; the finest used in the trade is 17 ends, which is about $\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch in width, but 21 and 25 ends are the most in request for making the Crinoline hat so well known in the most fashionable quarters. Bonnets were extensively made about fifty or sixty years ago of "Crinoline Fancy" plaits that were a mixture of the hair with silk, or straw, or Tuscan, or any similar fibres. They were also adorned with glass beads or bugles, and with silken knots and small tassels. This trade is now nearly extinct owing to the scarcity of hair, but its place is fully filled with imitations made of various kinds of artificial silk, cellulose, viscose, and the like.

A cheaper competitor to crinoline was brought out about 1870, when imitations in cotton fibre braids were put on the market, but these missed entirely the delicate open work of the real article. Similar effects were subsequently made in hemp. But about 1890 the Germans began to make cotton braids in an open, or as it was termed ajour, manner, imitating very closely the true effect of crinoline. This had a tremendous success, for the cost was very small. This was followed by the silk imitations mentioned above, and they have now reached such a stage of perfection of make and colour as to entirely outvie their progenitor. About 1892 the Swiss people put on the market the first "Tégal" braids, to be quickly followed by an Italian copy. This rapidly spread to Japan, and the product of
that far eastern country soon took the premier place, which at the time of writing it still holds.

Another product, largely used in the trade, although strictly speaking neither a plait nor a woven hat, is "Spalterie." This is wattle woven of fine willow-chip splints into various sized sheets for the different requirements of the trade; it is mainly used as a foundation for making hats to be covered with some delicate plait that will not stand any method of wet stiffening. It is extremely light in weight, and can be moulded to almost any shape, it will stand stiffening, and may be made as firm as stiff buckram. This emanated first from Italy, but now for some years the Japanese have been competing for the trade.