rate. Mary, it is the only subject you and I have ever quarrelled about. As for you, Beatrice, I am not going to quarrel with you. I can't coerce your opinion, of course, but I can command your obedience. On this occasion I asked you to express your judgment, but never venture to do it again."

"No, papa," returned the girl sadly; "but I have not formed any judgment. I have only said that I thought there might *possibly* be some doubt."

"Just so. Now go to bed. And you had better rise pretty early to look after your packing. We shall all go home to-morrow morning. But I will wait, if Aunt Ettrick will allow me, for a later train than the one I had intended to have taken. And, by the way, remember this, Beatrice: that if by any chance you should ever meet that young man again, you are not to know him—you understand? Now, good night. Why, child, how pale you look!" he added, suddenly struck by this fact. "We have all been upset, haven't we? Never mind, Tiny, it will be all right by to-morrow. We'll put the whole affair out of our minds. There, kiss me. Good night, dear."

If a night passed without a moment's sleep, through the presence of torturing doubts and perplexities, of a strange aching pain at the heart, and a dreary sense of blank disappointment, could be described as a "good" night, then poor little Beatrice Rossiter did have a very good night.

END OF CHAPTER THE SEVENTH.

PLAIT AND PLAITERS.

FEW parts of England have been less cut up and metamorphosed by railways than Buckinghamshire and the south of Bedfordshire; for though the Great Western line skirts the former county on the western, and the London and North Western on the eastern border, the tract round about the Chiltern Hills is untouched and to a great extent primitive, and the old chronicler who said, "Broad Buckingham may bear the blazon—bread and beef," would still find it an eminently corn-growing and pastoral district if he could arise from his quiet grave and look about him. The men are employed in agriculture, and, to use a local expression, "goo gintly an" throughout their quiet lives; and the women, instead of being absorbed by the care of their homes and families, devote most of their energies to the manufacture of straw plait, in which their fingers are as deft and nimble as are those of a German Hausfrau with her knitting-needles. The children, both boys and girls, begin to do it by the time they are three years old—plait as they walk along, as they sit on the doorsteps, and as they stand gossiping with their neighbours. Plaiting schools are kept by women, who teach the little ones to make their first "fives" and "sevens," provide them with seats and crocks of water, and see that they all keep at their work without idling. They are a sadly untidy and unthrifty set of people, scarcely knowing how to do a stitch of needlework, or cook a potato; addicted to making a cup of tea and eating dry bread, or bread and butter if they can afford it, when hunger becomes so pressing that they can stave off its cravings no longer, and buying a rasher or two of green bacon at the shop for a relish when they are lucky enough to have the necessary halfpence in their pockets.

The plaiting industry took root among them at the end of the last and early in the present century, and to some extent superseded the pillow-lace-making, which was then beginning to decline. There are middlemen in this as in every other trade, who hold the straw and deal it out to the women, and also buy the plait when made. They know how to buy cheap and keep their stock in hand till Fashion declares herself violently in favour of straw bonnets and hats, and then they make a capital harvest. The flinty soil of Bucks and Beds is supposed to impart a peculiar sparkling whiteness to the straw grown there, but its colour is very different before and after the bleaching process, which is the first stage in its preparation. This is principally effected by means of salt of tartar, and when the delicate primrose tint has succeeded to the browner one which characterises it in the field, the straw is dried at a high temperature, cut into foot-lengths, and tied up in hundreds. In this form it is handed by the dealers to their customers, who carry it home and proceed to split it up for use. The small instrument with which they do this is sometimes said to have been invented by a French prisoner, but was probably the idea of a youth named Thomas Simmons, of Chalfont St. Giles. It consists of a flat piece of thin wood with circular holes just large enough to admit of a whole straw being passed through. These holes are fitted with sharp steel cutters, and divide the straws into four, six, or eight strips according to the one used, and experienced splitters know their holes as well as bagatelle-players know the numbers of the cups into which their balls may go.

The split straws are then damped and "milled"—that is, passed between wooden rollers to render them soft and pliable—and at last are ready for plaiting.

PLAIT AND PLAITERS.

The mill is a very small machine, and is tightly screwed down, and worked by means of a handle in the same way as a crimping machine, or a modern wringer.

The very coarse plait of which many large hats are composed is made of whole straws, milled but not split, and when they are brown or black it is probable that discoloured straws are used up, which of course are perfectly admissible in plait that will be dyed before being sewn into shape. Otherwise great care must be taken in throwing aside all that are too dark or have any blemish in them.

Plait is made of an uneven number of strands or straws, from five to seven or eleven, or sometimes more ; and the golden rule impressed on the minds of juvenile beginners is—"Under one and over two, pull it tight and that will do."

Every one who looks at a straw will see that the outside of it is polished and the inside rough and dull, so that in twisting and turning the strands over and over both these surfaces would show, as they do in the inferior plaits denominated "single." Two strands or strips are, however, taken together with the roughness inside, and drawn through the mouth so that they adhere and are alike on both sides, and plait made of straw thus treated is called "double" seven or eleven or whatever the number may be. When dull-white-looking bonnets are the *mode*, this process is reversed, and the shiny sides of the straw placed together, and the plait then produced is locally called "rice" straw. It looks very much like fine chip, but is far better and more durable.

It stands to reason that straws a foot long will make only two or three inches of plait, and have to be renewed continually. This is done by "setting out" at regular intervals, usually of five stitches, on the left-hand side, and the short ends come round at exactly the right time, and are replaced, so that the left side bristles with ends quite short underneath and longer above. Well-made plait curves slightly inward, being somewhat tighter on the left than on the right edge where the pattern is made. The neatest and most common of these is caused by a dexterous twist of the outer strand, and is styled "whipcord;" when the last but one is twisted over the outer one, the pattern is "one notch," and successive twists have various names. Sometimes a strip of cane is inserted in the middle and pulled out as the work proceeds ; this produces a kind of open pattern or "bird's-eye." The plait pointed on each side, of which straw hats for men and boys are commonly composed, has only four strands, and is known as "pearl."

As soon as a yard or two of plait is made it is tied up into a coil, which hangs on or is tucked under the worker's arm ; a bunch of straws is held between the third and fourth fingers of her left hand, leaving the thumb and forefingers and the whole of the right hand free to manipulate with. The rapidity with which they move, forming the pattern, drawing out fresh straws from the bunch and setting them out, is almost magical, and so it had need be, for the plait must indeed be good and much in request which fetches a penny a yard, and half that price is far more common. A small crock of water always stands near, in which the straws are frequently dipped, so that the plait and finger-tips are in a moist condition, though they must on no account be kept too wet. When market or sale day approaches, the plait is clipped of its set-out ends, milled, and measured off into scores. Dozens of yards are never thought of ; the reckoning is always by scores and half-scores, and one need go no further from London than to Tring to see a plait market in full activity on Fridays. It is very difficult to say how many yards a quick worker can make in a day, as this naturally depends on whether the plait be coarse or fine, but usually the children and inferior workers make the coarser, and skilled hands the finer sorts. Every little one used to be a distinct gain to the family resources, but the School Board has made a difference in this respect by enforcing attendance for a certain number of hours daily, and by this means the girls know something more of the use of their needles than they did ten or twelve years ago.

We have hitherto spoken only of English straw, but there are other kinds, and notably the Italian straw, which in the parlance of milliners is "Tuscan," and in that of plaiters "benet," or "bennett." This straw is of the well-known *écru* or brownish tint for something like a quarter of a yard below the point at which the ears have been cut off, and of a nice white for a somewhat shorter distance towards the roots. It is, as its name imports, brought over from Tuscany. The white part is cut off and forms the material for a delicate and pretty plait, called by its makers "white end," which however is only in demand at intervals, sometimes of several years. The browner parts of the benets are usually plaited in a perfectly plain pattern containing eleven strands, or with "bird's-eye" centre, and the quantity required for one of the semi-poke bonnets, of which a few may be seen just now in ultra-fashionable shops, is three-score or thereabouts. Benet is slow work but higher-priced, and as each small straw is whole and does not want to be doubled, is rather less fidgety to make. Something with which the straw is prepared, however, is injurious to the fingers and causes the upper joints to waste, so that a person who has made benet all her life has very thin, pointed, withered-looking finger-tips. Bad gatherings and whitlows are also of frequent occurrence, and are ordinarily attributed to being poisoned by the benets.

Girls brought up to this occupation do not take kindly to domestic service, but the more enterprising among them who desire to see a little life, often contrive to save sufficient of their earnings to take them to Luton, where they learn bonnet-sewing, which is a business of itself, and one not yet entirely usurped by the sewing machine. The rows of machine-stitching would indeed disfigure a good hat or bonnet, and the best must always be put together by hand. The thread used is a stiff kind generally denominated as "wire." There are a great many departments in the Luton work-rooms, as the plait has to be bleached by

the fumes of brimstone after it is received from the dealers, sewn into shape, sized, blocked and pressed; and when a girl goes thither to learn them it is looked upon as a rise in life; and in truth good, steady lasses, who can bear the necessary heat and confinement, do go home from time to time with a good stock of clothes and a little money in the savings-bank. The majority of the young women who work at Luton, however, are the daughters of small tradesmen and farmers, and it is comparatively few of the plaiters who ever reach that goal. Most of them marry early and bring up a tribe of flaxen-haired babies to follow in their own footsteps, and mark the epochs of life as the "time afore last when we made benet," "when whole straw fust come in," or "when there was sich a lot o' pearl about."

E. CLARKE.

A CHINESE NOVEL

OUR letters on the embroidered silken cover—four word-letters that have a confused square aspect, resembling something between an outlined distorted coat-of-arms and a gridiron—tell the initiated that this book, printed on leaves of doubled flimsy paper, is "Pih-shay-tsing-ke"—or, in English, *The History of the Spirit of the White Adder*. It is one of the novels popular in China among the middle and less educated classes. For us, with our ideas of light reading, the spirit of a white serpent would be an uninviting subject; but we forewarn the reader that better things may be expected. Even Chinese taste would not be charmed by a serpent-spirit that was only a serpent; to use the words of the American poet—"He war a woman."

The hero of the novel is Han-wen, a pig-tailed youth, apprenticed to an apothecary. His romantic history and his misfortunes all date from the day when he pays homage at the tombs of his ancestors, and somewhat inconsistently goes farther to amuse himself, and is overtaken by rain and by two sirens in need of an umbrella. The narrative deals alternately with human affairs—tea-drinkings, dinners, marriages, pagodas, shops; and with preternatural wonders—magical changes, dragons, genii of the stars. The heroine is called White, or, perhaps we might say Blanche. She and her maid, Little Blue, have a provoking habit of escaping our sympathy by making themselves invisible whenever they like, or going up in clouds and riding any distance, like witches, with vapours instead of broomsticks. The genii of the stars, the Buddhist Fa-haï, from the Pagoda of the Mountain of Gold, and various other awful personages, have the power of crossing the whole Celestial Empire in cloud-chariots whither they will. These great folks address Blanche politely as "Odious Monster" when they meet her out cloud-riding; and we also note that her cloud is a black one, full of foul and poisonous air. The explanation is that Blanche is the spirit of a white snake, and is a Chinese fairy—a very different thing from a European fairy, since it possesses none of the graceful and pretty attributes that we associate with the word, but, instead, is fated with the character of something fearful and baneful. We are first introduced to Blanche in the Cave of the Pure Winds on a high mountain. There, we are told, the spirit of the white snake had passed nineteen hundred years "in the practice of virtue"—with the Chinese very much the same thing as "Tao," *Reason*—to expiate the faults of a former life. The white serpent is, in fact, a woman, condemned by Fo, the Chinese Buddha, to assume that form; and at the beginning of the novel she has managed to take human shape again, tired of her long seclusion. In the garden of what we should call a "house to let," in the Street of the Two Tea Trees, in Tsien-tang, she meets another snake that has assumed human shape. It is the spirit of a blue serpent. After a contest in magical powers, Little Blue consents to serve her; and when they enter the deserted house it makes us benighted foreigners envious of the wisdom and method of the Chinese to hear that they lived happily together, "observing mutually the relations which the book of rites has established between mistress and servant." They are beautiful young maidens, one in white embroidered robes with a red sash, and with aristocratically small feet necessitating her servant's support; the other all in blue. As in Western novels, the opening illustrates the adage, "the course of true love never did run smooth;" but here every chapter naïvely ends with a paragraph hinting woes and wonders yet to come, and adding always, "If you want to know what happened to Han-wen—read the next chapter."

What happened to Han-wen was this:—That misguided young man, after burning gilt paper and laying offerings at the tombs of his ancestors, shook off his grief, and meant, in popular phrase, "to make a day of it." He crossed the Kiang River, and wandered by the Lake Si-hou—of which we may make an imaginative vision from any *bric-à-brac* tea-pot or willow-plate, and learn for once what befalls the people who make holiday in the scenery of porcelain and willow-ware. Han-wen saw two beautiful girls, mistress and maid, looking down from one of the quaint wood-work bridges; and they saw Han-wen—with mutual heart-