

### The Plait Girl - A Bedfordshire Sketch

Before a rustic cottage door,  
And sitting in the sun,  
I saw a girl of eight years old,  
And a tiny little one.

Each loft arm held a hoop of plait,  
Fast growing to a score;  
For quickly moved their fingers small,  
As I drew near the door.

"Well done, my little folks," said I,  
Unto the elder maid ;  
"Is that your little sister there,  
So busy at her trade ?"

"Yes, sir," she said, and from her mouth  
Another straw she took ;  
"And that's my brother Billy there,  
A plaitin' near the brook."

"Do children plait so young," I said,  
"Oh yes, 'taint nothin' new,  
There's Billy, he are less than her,  
And Billy he plaits too."

"What may you earn ? you cannot say,  
Come, try and give a guess ;"  
"Well, sometimes eighteen pence a week,  
But sometimes I earns less."

"When father had the fever, sir,  
We little money got,  
But a lady kind, bayed all my plait,  
And then I earned a lot."

"But mother splits the straws for ma,  
And she does more nor that,  
She clips the ends, and 'mills' it too,  
Afore she sells the plait."

"And then she takes all what we've made,  
And though it rains or snows,  
To sell it all, on market days,  
To Dunstable she goes."

"But mother says, that by and by,  
If I makes haste and grows,  
That I shall go to Luton, sir,  
Where *everybody* sews."

"I do so long for that to come,  
I are so proud to grow :  
They don't do plait at Luton, sir,  
They only has to sew."

"You love a romp at play, don't you,  
On the green before the door?"  
Yes, mother lets us play *sometimes*,  
When we have done a score."

"And can you read this little book,  
Which in my hand I hold ?"  
"No, sir, I can't ; I means to try,  
That is—when I are old."

"What! don't you go to school ?" said I  
The child hung down her head;  
"Oh ! please sir, we don't go to school,  
We has to earn our' bread."

I gave the book, and turned away,  
And musing o'er the chat,  
I sighed that children are not taught,  
Because they have to plait.

(By 'Nitram Wilsey'. Clearly a pseudonym: for Martin Wilsey? Nitram also wrote *The Cream of Tartar* in 1863 – an original Chinese Burlesque extravaganza)