

WORK FOR THE WEAK

Why Should Women Monopolize Need work

THERE is something pathetic in the sight of a delicate woman trying to do a strong man's work in the fields or at the factory; there is something equally pathetic in the sight of a big man trying to sew, but the pathos lies in the lack of skill, not in the action. It does not make us sad to see a tailor sewing or a chef cooking; there is nothing pathetic in the sight of a strong young woman pitching hay or sawing wood, if she does it well, but a lack of early training makes her handle the pitchfork awkwardly, while her brother is equally clumsy with thread and needle.

We are accustomed to see women in many professions that were recently regarded as wholly masculine, but it causes some surprise to see fancy-work done by men in the ultra-feminine exhibit of needle-work at a Fall Fair. This is the work of returned soldiers, who pass the dreary hours of convalescence in doing embroidery or in knitting. One of these men, whose legs are encased in plaster casts, carried off a first prize for knitting at the Toronto Industrial Exhibition, and another poor fellow who lost a hand in the present war, has knitted some wonderfully good specimens with the aid of a simple device of pegs in a board. Both were sailors, strong, brave men. One of them went overseas accompanied by his two sons, and they all served in the same regiment. One boy was killed, one is still fighting, and the father is in a convalescent home, where, on bright days, he is carried to the roof and sits knitting in the sunshine with his mutilated legs on a chair before him. He wears a knitted cap of navy blue ornamented with a tassel, and he likes the bracing, windy autumn weather, when the clouds go scudding overhead. Far away in the distance he sees a strip of deep blue water, and many air-ships from a neighboring encampment sail across the paler blue overhead. Other patients find the roof too windy in mid-October, but not he! It was uncomfortably hot in the summer, he will tell you—no shade—and they could so easily have rigged up an awning! You feel sure that if he had the use of his legs that awning could be speedily put in place with every rope taut. But that is work for the strong, and he is not able to help.

The one-handed knitter works indoors, sitting on a straight chair by his narrow cot, with his knitting-frame and wool spread out before him. His artificial hand lies on the little table at his bedside, and the poor stump of his left arm helps to hold the wool. He has removed his coat for greater freedom, and his arms are tattooed with many wonderful patterns. He is putting fringe on the child's scarf. A well-made little hood lies beside it, but the knitter is dissatisfied.

"I used to knit well when I was a sailor and had two hands," he says sadly, "but it is very different now."

Some of the other boys are trying it while they sit up in bed. But even with two hands they find it hard work, and the only embroidery they are able to do is simple cross-stitch.

"Why didn't they teach us how to sew and knit when we were kids?" they grumble, and the girls who are trying to fill men's places say to each other:

"If we had only tried to build things when we were little instead of everlastingly playing with dolls, we'd be better equipped for this work!"

The girl who is studying mechanics bewails the fact that she, being a good little girl, never pulled her mechanical toys to pieces or hung around the garage to watch the mechanics mend the cars as her brother did, and the boy confesses that he always

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wanted to sew only he was afraid people would laugh at him, he admits, too, that the reason he started to smoke cigarettes was that he never knew what to do with his hands.

"Girls can always sew or knit or play with their rings and bracelets, but there isn't anything a boy can do to lessen the boredom of dull conversation!"

MANY of us have met one man who did some sort of fancy-work, but he is usually a unique character in our circle of acquaintances. I knew a boy of seventeen who crocheted wool mats. He was a large, husky youth with a premature moustache, fond of sports, otherwise his school friends would have ridiculed him unmercifully and called him "Sissy." I once crossed the ocean with a courteous middle-aged gentleman, an engineer by profession, who astonished his fellow-passengers by wearing chains of multi-colored beads in beautiful and intricate patterns. We know that the best Japanese embroideries are done by men, and that in India men are largely employed in the production of embroidered shawls and hand-made rugs, but it astonishes us to see one of Anglo-Saxon derivation using a needle with any degree of dexterity. There is a stronger prejudice against men doing needle-work than there is against women smoking cigarettes, but the war demands that the world's work should be no longer divided into man's share and women's share. There is work that must be done by the strong, and work that must be done by the weak, and the incapacitated soldier must bravely shoulder the lighter burden and the healthy woman must courageously bend her back to receive a heavier load.

THE problem of providing work for the seriously incapacitated is greater in Canada than it would be in countries where handicrafts have a commercial value. We know of men who, with two artificial legs, have yet been able to secure a remunerative position, but frequently the maimed suffer from shell-shock and a gentle occupation that can be followed in seclusion is essential to their health. The Russian peasant industries produce goods valued at one hundred million dollars a year. The manufacture of icons alone, which are chiefly made of hand-worked metal, employs an army of workmen. France does an enormous business in hand-made and hand-embroidered linen and underwear, and most of the cheap German toys are made by hand in the homes of the peasants, but in Canada handicrafts are fostered with difficulty.

Laws regulating hand labor and preventing the employment of children, make it almost impossible to commercialize home industries, and in the large and sparsely settled territory of Canada, with its diverse mixture of races, it is difficult to collect and dispose of the variegated output of handicrafts: the baskets, porcupine quill and bead embroidery of the Indians, the Eskimo earrings, the Canadian homespun and rag carpets and the embroideries and linens of European peasantry. The Canadian Handicrafts Guild, through its branches throughout Canada, handles a most

varied collection of home-made articles of real artistic value. They have discovered good craftsmen and helped them to get proper prices for their work and through them patterns, stitches and designs which were in danger of being lost, have been brought to life, but the average standard of Canadian Home Industries may be better judged by the ex-

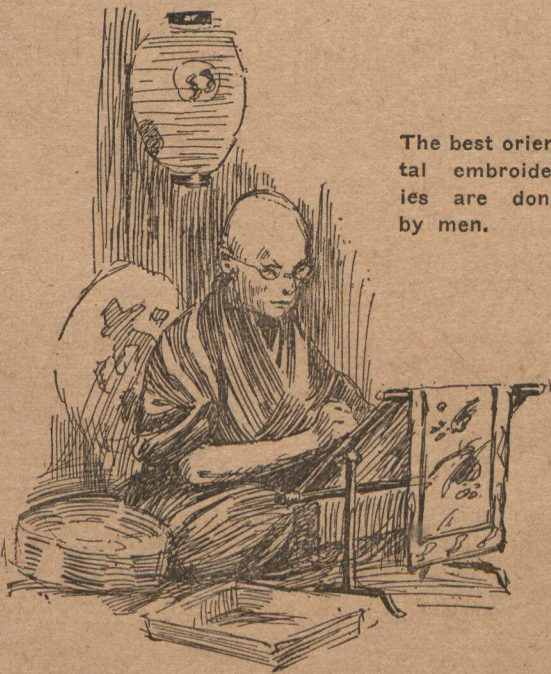


The old sailor is an expert knitter.

hibits which can be seen at local fairs.

TIME has wrought great changes in the typical "Woman's Building," and useful knitting has employed many fingers that might otherwise be putting a dollar's worth of embroidery silk on a hideous stamped design for a centrepiece. But it contains many atrocities in spite of the war, things that will be abhorred by our grandchildren, as we detest their wool-embroidered mottoes of "Home, Sweet Home." There are cushion-tops that would have been more beautiful without the embroidery that covers them, china that would be more attractive divested of its floral wreaths and gold leaf, and cakes that would prove more wholesome if they could be resolved into their original ingredients of butter, eggs, sugar and flour. Some of the most attractive cushion-tops and tray-covers were made by returned soldiers. Though only embroidered in simple cross-stitch they are more decorative than the time-consuming padded and shaded embroidery in the next case. You can see a far prettier display of china in any of our good shops, they also show finer laces, better made underwear. Not being one of the fortunate people who sampled the home-made delicacies and awarded prizes, we cannot judge of the quality of the home-cooking, but it did not look half so appetizing as those we see displayed in the confectioners' windows or served in the best hotels. Everything that used to be regarded as wholly woman's work is now produced, largely under the direction of men, in factories. Fancy-work, painting and music, are no longer regarded as the only fit occupation for a lady. Men and women must work side by side, according to their strength.

SKILFUL and artistic hand work is always in demand, and there are many too weak to devote their time to anything else. The reason our handicrafts have not attained a higher standard is that we follow the fashion in fancy-work just as we do in clothes, and prefer to do the newest stitches, make the latest novelties, rather than to perfect our skill in any one line. We follow our fancy, but it seems superfluous to add the word "work," yet I have known strong young girls to really labor over the production of some utterly worthless article usually designed to be given as a Christmas present to a girl friend—a handkerchief sachet, a whisk-holder, a photograph-frame, white linen embroidered with forget-me-nots, something that will be used for a year and then thrown away, or if carefully kept in tissue paper, it may serve as a gift to somebody else the following season. It is pitiful to see strong, intelligent girls, who might be doing useful work, spending good daylight working hours in this foolish fashion. If hand-work is worth while it should be done by the weak and the aged, or since a change of labour is rest, reserved for our hours of leisure.



The best oriental embroideries are done by men.