

People Prefer Junk

by James Murphy

"They don't make nylons the way they used to," a lady of my acquaintance complained the other day. "I'll bet some enterprising manufacturer could make a fortune if he had the original formula Dupont used to make those first nylon stockings. Why I had three pairs that lasted me a whole year, and even then, they only went at the toes, they didn't run at all."

"But," I countered, "see what happened to manufacturers of men's nylon socks who continued producing long-lasting hose long after the makers of women's hose had stopped putting high quality nylon thread into their products. Even though they knew that the hose would last, they gambled on being able to get enough reorders after a year's wear to enable them to stay in business. Their estimates were woefully optimistic, as too many men were able to nurse their three or four pairs for from three to four years. With little or no reordering from such "satisfied customers" these manufacturers either had to go into some other business or into production of the latest best-selling "stretch socks." Now there are plenty of reorders from "dissatisfied customers."

I am sure that it is not Dupont's fault, as so many people believe, that the original long-lasting yarn is not now used to make stockings, slips and such personal apparel, but the fault of the people themselves whose buying habits tend to enrich the producers of "junk" and keep the high-quality purveyors dependent upon the luxury trade. High quality nylon is still being produced, but it is being used for such things as fishing lines and medical tubing. Dupont would probably be glad to sell tons and tons of their better nylon yarn but they

have been told by their customers that they won't buy quality hose in quantities large enough to justify a large capital investment.

This is only one example in a long list of high-quality commodities which have been displaced by cheaper, inferior rivals. Vintage wines, liquors, hard-cover books, fountain pens, to name a few, have been relegated to the luxury trade. A special case of the rule that people prefer "junk" is provided by gold currency. Even when gold coins and notes were legal tender, people tended to hoard them and use the over-inflated "greebacks" instead. Sir Thomas Gresham observed the same tendency in England more than three hundred years ago and formulated his famous law. "Inferior or cheaper currency," he said, "drives a better or more valuable one out of circulation." A more inclusive law would read: inferior or cheaper goods drives better or more expensive goods out of production. The cheaper goods may not be the most economical in the long run, despite its lower initial cost. Given a choice between two equally desirable items most people will pick the least expensive, even though, in the long run, the other would prove to be the better bargain.

We can no more blame the government or the manufacturers for this, than we can blame the sunspots. The fault lies with a system which puts a premium upon scarcity; which causes people to reckon their status in terms of the value of their possessions, rather than on the number and quality of them. As long as we have to give up a valuable thing (money) in order to obtain other valuable things, this type of *junk*-preference psychology will prevail.