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From Cellulose to Satin

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WHAT is it that is used for the filmiest, gossamer veil on a hat on Fifth Avenue and for the strongest, toughest water-resistant fisherman’s nets in New England, with over 450 uses in between? It’s rayon, and it still has a great field, with many possibilities.

Rayon is a man-made fiber, which man, in producing, tries to follow as closely as he can the process used by the silkworm in producing silk. The raw material is “digested” by chemicals in a vat to make rayon, much as the stomach of a silkworm makes silk.

The silkworm has two small openings through which it squirts the liquid that congeals as soon as it gets into the air, and then is spun around himself. In the case of rayon, the raw material is pushed under pressure through microscopic apertures in a platinum spinneret. These openings are sometimes only .003 inches in diameter. Machines then catch the congealed fiber as it leaves the spinneret and spin it into yarn.

The rayon waste, chiefly the fiber discarded during the manufacture of the yarns, although the best waste is from the winding and spinning departments, is used to make spun rayon yarns, or is combined with other fibers and spun into union material.

When rayon first came on the market in 1911, it was an ugly, sleazy, pink shiny stuff that was sold only in bargain basements. At first improvement was slow. Then, when many women of clubs all over the country began objecting to the misleading names placed on rayon, and its various other faults, rayon really improved—the fiber itself improved, better patterns were woven, lovely clothes were designed, the advertising field began to include more rayon producers. The product was also afterwards called by its honest name. Rayon is now usually clearly marked, as slightly, medium, or heavily weighted.

Today rayon is no longer just a substitute for silk. It has a definite character of its own. It ranks in beauty with silk but costs less. Although pure silk is the strongest of all fibers, good rayon wears well, and rayon taffeta will not crack, a bad fault weighted silk taffeta possesses.

However, there are still objections to rayon. Acetates must be ironed with a cool iron, as they will melt under a hot one.

Rayon stockings have not yet shaped themselves to the foot, although one manufacturer claims he has a new rayon that will correct this fault. When wet, rayon loses from 40 to 75 percent of its strength, therefore it should be handled very carefully in washing.

The advantages of rayon are many. Rayon can be made in many thicknesses—that is, the diameter of the yarn may vary. It can be heavy or light, and of any length. Rayon resists water, abrasion and sunlight to a great extent. It is also a friendly fiber and will combine easily with silk, wool or cotton. Rayon is a smooth fabric, and is therefore not readily soiled. White rayon will not turn yellow in washing or dry cleaning. The filament can be regulated in the making to be either dull or lustrous.

Rayon is classified into four main types: nitro or Chardonnate rayon, cuprammonium, viscose and acetate, of which viscose and acetate are the most common and popular.

The manufacturers of acetate claim it is more immune to stains, such as perspiration, grease, ink, fruit juices, will absorb less moisture and has better draping qualities.

Rayon has made tremendous strides in the textile industry. The trouble people have had with it in years past is due mostly to their lack of knowledge about its characteristics. If handled properly, it will give satisfactory wear.

The demand does not exceed the supply. Its popularity evidences the fact that rayon is definitely here to stay, and is taking its place among the top products in the textile world.