ELECTRICITY IS A SHOCKER

Rather like our introduction to sex, we probably all remember our first electric shock. That is if it has happened to you – an electric shock I mean, rather than an introduction to sex. The house of my childhood, built in the heyday of Edwardian housing construction between the wars and extended upwards to the attic in 1950 had a very illuminating set of electrical installations. Nowadays any competent NICEIC inspector would probably take one look and treat the house as a potential crime scene, before marking off the whole area with stripy red and white hazard tape marked "DO NOT CROSS".

However at the tender and investigative age of eight I was intrigued to determine the reason why the illuminated dial of our ancient Philips wireless set sometimes went out at the same time that the deep brown voice of Alvar Liddell on The Home Service momentarily disappeared. The radio was plugged, via a black Bakelite three way adaptor into the two pin fifteen amp socket power supply, way down in an impenetrable recess on the dark varnished skirting board. I reckoned that the problem probably lay somewhere in the adaptor, because if I wiggled it slightly I could replicate the effect. Naturally enough I couldn't see what I was doing so touch and feel was the obvious approach. My fingers probed softly downwards and found themselves connected through the space between the adaptor and the socket to the two live pins of the adaptor. My reactions were swift. I withdrew the hand and, too stunned to wail or even to cry out, I dismally awaited the certain death that I knew must await me. After all – I had just been electrocuted. Whatever would Jesus say to me in a few minutes time? Did this awful death count as an accident or would I forever be cast into a fiery furnace for killing myself?

Some minutes later I found to my amazement that I had not died and indeed that my shocked fingers didn't even hurt. Needless to say, on this occasion I had escaped death. After that time my relationship with electricity became much more casual: after all *I knew what an electric shock felt like.* Familiarity is said to breed contempt and it is so very true.

Many years (and many minor and major electric shocks) later I had two very near death experiences, and I now treat electricity with much more caution. During my early teenage years, like so many boys, I really did not like school work so was probably a bright and lazy pupil. However the one thing that really excited my imagination was the then new field of

Electronics, and specifically that of Amateur Radio. Maths; physics and chemistry were my best subjects, so I could just about muddle along and look as if I was working tolerably hard in the sixth form. But life really began at home with my home made or adapted ex War Department (WD) equipment. A lot of it was strung together in a most unprofessional manner, but it worked. I had an ex-WD R1155 communications receiver, of which I was inordinately proud, but which often developed annoying faults, necessitating it's being withdrawn from it's steel case by means of two large chromium handles. I was inordinately proud of those chromium handles: they were a retrofit, purchased in the seamy area of Lisle Street, just North of Leicester Square and nothing like the kit which Lancaster crews had to use in the Second World War. A trip to Lisle Street was fraught with danger for a 14 year old adolescent. Prostitutes would hang out of almost every doorway advertising their wares in the lewdest way possible. (Just imagine what I would have made of Hamburg's Reeperbahn!).

I digress. One very hot steamy day a fault developed in my receiver and I placed both sweaty hands on the handles preparatory to withdrawing it from its case. As I did so I noticed a loose (twisted) pair of wires coming loose at the right hand side on an adjacent bit of kit. Without thinking I casually grabbed the wires to tighten them again and made a near fatal error. You will no doubt remember the old saw about the plumbers' pipes being prevented from leaking by means of an old rag. Electricians are no different. Safety is cast to the four winds – "It works, so don't bother to improve things". I had forgotten that this was the high tension direct current feed to my transmitting kit – and that it was live, as it happened, with 675 Volts DC. So I had connected my damp sweaty body directly across a potentially lethal DC supply with the current passing right through my chest, where you will recall that the heart is located. I don't clearly remember what happened next. With one mighty spasm I pulled the receiver out of it's case and dropped it on my left big toe. Fortunately this simultaneously disconnected the 675 volt supply and the pain in my left foot stopped me blacking out. I remember that my vision turned into a set of black and yellow vertical bars for a minute or two and I could not hear properly. My right index finger had two very nasty puncture burns right down to the bone and I could hear my mother calling from two floors down to ask if I was alright……

Later that same year I had a second and still more dramatic brush with death. As radio amateurs we took great pains to ensure that our aerials were well insulated from the earth. Some colleagues who lived on the hills above Luton were indeed able to draw sparks from their aerials up to half an inch long (when not connected to the kit of course) when a large cumulus cloud passed overhead. Typical males in fact - forever comparing sizes or heights of whatever. Living in a valley I was quite unable to perform the same trick. However on one occasion I had attempted to have my usual lunchtime "sked" with a colleague some thirty miles away and had failed dismally, due to the appalling interference from static and an impending deluge from a summer thunderstorm. "Aha!" I thought, "I wonder if I could draw any sparks from my disconnected aerial today?" To my great glee I found that I could indeed draw sparks up to half an inch long (probably around 10,000 volts). But it was time to return to school and I was faced with a dilemma. My lately deceased father had always drummed into me the importance of attaching one's aerial firmly to an earth point before leaving the house. But would it be safe for me to grab the crocodile clip at the end of the aerial and swiftly attach it to the nearest bit of earthed metal? On reflection I decided that discretion was the better part of valour and it saved my life. I went into the next room to see if any large clouds were looming. There were. An enormous black thundercloud was overhead. At that moment there was a simultaneous bang and flash and a spark some eight inches long jumped from my aerial clip to the nearest piece of earthed metal. At a guess it was about half a million volts. Every single fuse in our house blew instantaneously. All of the internal fuses in my electronic equipment blew simultaneously. There was a dreadful hush in the house and I was shaking like a leaf. We had just missed being struck by lightning, and I had once again cheated death. As I recall, I was late back for school that day.

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