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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK POPPA NEEDS SHORTS ***

POPPA NEEDS SHORTS

Given valid data, you can reach completely wrong conclusions. But given a wrong conclusion, you can still get a right answer!

WALT and LEIGH RICHMOND

Illustrated by John Schoenherr

Little Oley had wandered into forbidden territory again—Big Brother Sven's ham shack. The glowing bottles here were an irresistible lure, and he liked to pretend that he knew all there was to know about the mysteries in this room.

Of course, Sven said that not even *he* knew all of the mysteries, though he admitted he was one of the best ham operators extant, with QSOs from eighteen countries and thirty-eight states to his credit.

At the moment, Sven was busily probing into an open chassis with a hot soldering iron.

"Short's in here some place," he muttered.

"What makes shorts, Sven?" Oley wasn't so knowledgeable but what he would ask an occasional question.

Sven turned and glared down. "What are you doing in here? You know it's a Federal Offense for anybody to come into this room without I say so?"

"Momma and Hilda come in all the time, and you don't say so." Oley stood firm on what he figured were legal grounds. "What makes shorts?"

Sven relented a little. This brother had been something of a surprise to him, coming along when Sven was a full ten years old. But, he reflected, after a few years maybe I should get used to the idea. Actually, he sort of liked the youngster.

"Shorts," he said, speaking from the superior eminence of his fourteen years to the four-year-old, "is when electricity finds a way to get back where it came from without doing a lot of hard work getting there. But you see, electricity like to work; so, even when it has an easy way, it just works harder and uses itself up."

This confused explanation of shorts was, of course, taken verbatim, despite the fact that Oley couldn't define half the words and probably couldn't even pronounce them.

"I don't like shorts. I don't like these pink shorts Momma put on me this morning. Is they electrics, Sven?"

Sven glanced around at the accidentally-dyed-in-the-laundry, formerly white shorts.

"Um-m-m. Yeah. You could call 'em electric."

With this Oley let out whoop and dashed out of the room, trailing a small voice behind him. "Momma, Momma. Sven says my shorts is electric!"

"I'll short Sven's electrics for him, if he makes fun of your shorts!" Oley heard his mother's comforting reply.

In the adult world days passed before Oley's accidentally acquired pattern of nubilous information on the subject of shorts was enlarged. It was only days in the adult world, but in Oley's world each day was a mountainous fraction of an entire lifetime, into which came tumbling and jumbling—or were pulled—bits, pieces, oddments, landslides and acquisitions of information on every subject that he ran into, or that ran into him. Nobody had told Oley that acquiring information was his job at the moment; the acquisition was partly accidental, mostly instinctive, and spurred by an intense curiosity and an even more intense determination to master the world as he saw it.

There was the taste of the sick green flowers that Momma kept in the window box and, just for a side course, a little bit of the dirt, too. There were the patterns of the rain on the window, and the reactions of a cat to having its tail pulled. The fact that you touch a stove one time, and it's cool and comfortable to lay your head against, and another time it hurts. Things like that. And other things—towering adults who sometimes swoop down on you and throw you high into the air; and most times walk over you, around you, and ignore you completely. The jumble of assorted and unsorted information that is the heritage of every growing young inquiring brain.

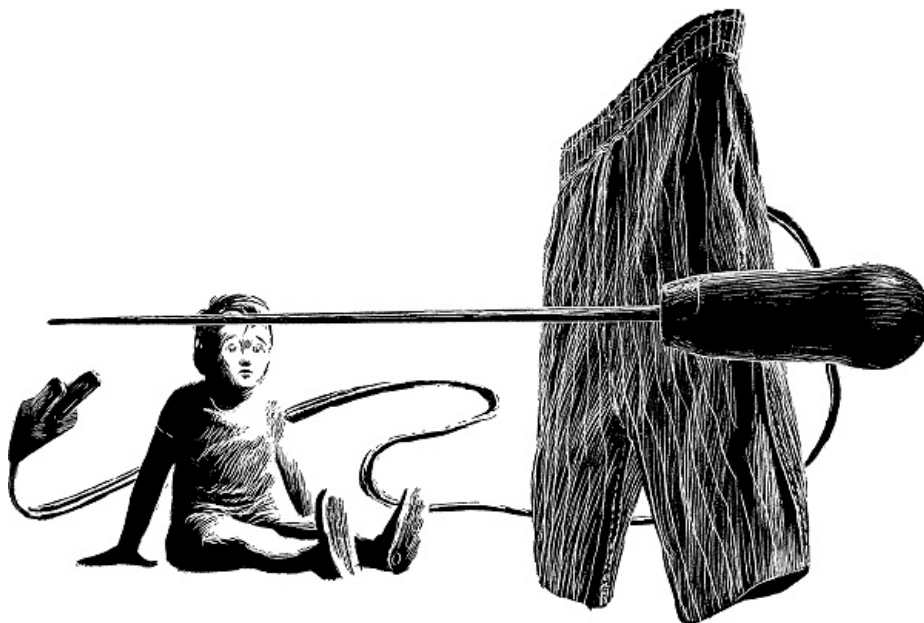
In terms of time, it was only a couple of weeks, if you were looking at it as an adult, until the next "shorts" incident.

Oley was sitting peacefully at the breakfast table, doing his level best to control the manipulation of the huge knife-fork-and-spoon, plate-bowl-and-glass, from which he was expected to eat a meal. Things smelled good. Momma was cooking doste, and that to Oley smelled best of all. The doster ticked quietly to itself, then gave a loud pop, and up came two golden-brown slices of doste. Dostes? Oley wasn't sure. But he hadn't really begun paying too much attention to whether one doste was the same as two doste or what, though he could quite proudly tell you the difference between one and two.

Out it came, and fresh butter was spread on it, and in went two shiny white beds, for some more doste.

Little Oley watched in fascination. And now he reached for the tremendous glass sitting on the table in front of him. But his fingers didn't quite make it. Somehow, the glass was heavy and slippery, and it eluded him, rolled over on its side, and spilled the bright purple juicy contents out across the table in a huge swish.

Oley wasn't dismayed, but watched with a researcher's interest as the bright purple juice swept across the table towards the busily ticking doster. Momma, of course, wasn't here, or she would have been gruff about it. She'd just gone into the other room.



The juice spread rapidly at first, and then more and more slowly, making a huge, circuitous river spreading across the table, first towards the doster and then away from it towards the frayed power-cord lying on the table. It touched and began to run along the cord. Not a very eventful recording so far, but Oley watched, charmed.

As he watched, a few bubbles began to appear near the frayed spot. A few wisps of steam. And then, suddenly, there was a loud, snarling splat—and Momma screamed from the doorway. "That juice is making a short!"

The information, of course, was duly recorded. Juice makes shorts.

It was a minor item of information, mixed into a jumble of others, and nothing else was added to this particular file for nearly another week.

Oley was playing happily on the living room floor that night. Here there was much to explore, though an adult might not have thought twice about it. Back in the corner behind Momma's doing machine a bright, slender piece of metal caught Oley's attention. Bigger on one end than the other, but not really very big anywhere, the sewing machine needle proved fascinating. As a first experiment, Oley determined that it worked like a tooth by biting himself with it. After that he went around the room, biting other things with it. Information, of course, is information, and to be obtained any way one can.

The brown, snaky lamp cord was the end of this experiment. Oley bit it, viciously, with his new tooth, and had only barely observed that it had penetrated completely through when there was a loud splat, and all the lights in the room went out.

In the darkness and confusion, of course, Oley moved away, seeking other new experiences. So the cause of the short that Momma and Poppa yakked so loudly about was never attributed to Oley's actions, but only to "How could a needle have gotten from your sewing machine into this lamp cord, Alice?"

But the sum of information had increased. Neatles stuck into lamp cords had something to do with shorts.

More time passed. And this time the file on shorts was stimulated by Poppa. The big, rough, booming voice had always scared Oley a bit when it sounded mad, like now.

"Alice, I've just got to have some more shorts!"

Poppa was rummaging in a drawer far above Oley's head, so he couldn't see the object under discussion. But all he already knew about shorts—the information passed in review before him.

Shorts are useful. They help electricians to work harder.

Shorts you wear, and they are electricians.

Wires are electricians.

Shorts can be made by juice.

Shorts can be made by neatles, that bite like teeth.

Poppa needs more shorts.

But Oley wasn't motivated to act at the moment. Just sorting out information and connecting it with other information files in the necessarily haphazard manner that might eventually result in something called intelligence, although he didn't know that yet.

It was a week later in the kitchen, when Momma dropped a giant version of the neatle on the floor, that his information file in this area increased again.

"Is that a neatle?" Oley asked.

His mother laughed quietly and looked fondly at her son as she put the ice pick back on the table.

"I guess you could call it a needle, Oley," she told him. "An ice needle."

Oley instinctively waited until Momma's back was turned before taking the nice neatle to try its biting powers; and instinctively took it out of the kitchen before starting his experiments.

As he passed the cellar door he heard a soft gurgling and promptly changed course. Pulling open the door with difficulty, he seated himself on the cellar stairs to watch a delightful new spectacle—frothing, gurgling water making its way across the floor towards the stairs. It looked wonderfully dirty and brown, and to Oley it was an absorbing phenomenon. It never occurred to him to tell Momma.

Suddenly above him the cellar door slammed open, and Poppa came charging down the stairs, narrowly missing the small figure, straight into the rising waters, intent, though Oley couldn't know it, on reaching the drain pipe in the far corner of the cellar to plug it before water from the spring rains could back up farther and really flood the cellar out.

Halfway across the cellar, Poppa reached up and grasped the dangling overhead light to turn it on, in order to see his way to the drain—and suddenly came to a frozen, rigid, gasping stop as his hand clamped firmly over the socket.

Little Oley watched. There was juice in the cellar. Poppa had hold of an electric. Was Poppa

trying to make the shorts he needed?

Oley wasn't sure. He thought it probable. And from the superior knowledge of his four years, Oley already knew a better way to make shorts. Neatles make good shorts. Juice don't do so well.

Suddenly, Oley decided to prove his point: Nice neatles probably made even better shorts than other neatles—and there was a big electric running up the side of the stairs—an electric fat enough to make a real good shorts. Maybe lots of shorts.

Raising his nice neatle, Oley took careful aim and plunged it through the 220-volt stove feeder cable.

Oley woke up. The strange pretty lady in white was a new experience. Somebody he hadn't seen before. And there seemed to be something wrong with his hand, but Oley hadn't noticed it very much, yet.

"Well, my little Hero's awake! And how are you this morning? Your Momma and Poppa will be in to see you in just a minute."

The pretty lady in white went away, and Oley gazed around the white room with its funny shape, happily recorded the experience, and dozed off again.

Then suddenly he was awakened again. Momma was there; and Poppa. And Sven. But they all seemed different somehow this morning. Momma had been crying, even though she was smiling bravely now. And Poppa seemed to have a new softness that he'd seldom seen before. Sven was looking puzzled.

"I still say, Pop, that he's a genius. He *must* have known what he was doing."

"Oley," Poppa's voice was husky—gruff, but kinder and softer than usual. "I want you to answer me carefully. But understand that it's all right either way. I just want you to tell me. Why did you put the ice pick through the stove cable? You saved my life, you know. But I'd like to know how you knew how."

Little Oley grinned. His world was peaceful and wonderful now. And all the big adults were bending and leaning down and talking to him.

"Nice neatle," he said. "Big electric. Poppa needed shorts."

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