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# A History of the Vanishing Hitchhiker

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[This is the second of two articles concerning the vanishing hitchhiker. The first article, which dealt with an analysis of the elements and versions of the story, appeared in the *California Folklore Quarterly* of October, 1942. Most of the variants were included in the first article and may be found on pp. 306–307, 318–335. A list of additional stories already in print is given on p. 327.—THE EDITORS.]

THE FACT that the following tale is so frequently accompanied by sturdy assurances that it is a true story added zest to our search for some old tale from which it might have developed. Since Karl Lohmeyer traced the widespread story of the dream about the treasure on the Coblenz bridge to an “actual incident” in the middle of the sixteenth century only to have Bolte take it back to the tenth-century Persian source of the *Arabian Nights*,<sup>1</sup> we reasoned that a legend of the proportions of the vanishing hitchhiker would have a source somewhere. So we delved into the ghostly literature of the past, hopeful that we could unearth something. But all that we can say at the present is that if this tale has a historical antecedent we have not yet found it.

Many of the elements, it is true, have had long and active careers in European ghostly lore and a few may be traced to Greek and Roman times. A study of Stith Thompson's motif index shows that many of the ghosts of European folklore haunt roads<sup>2</sup> or places where they suffered accident or misfortune.<sup>3</sup> They may also appear to travelers and accompany them for a time,<sup>4</sup> but as yet we have found no tale in which such a traveling ghost was not immediately recognized as a spirit, unless one counts the Irish Washerwoman of Kingsley's *The Water Babies*.<sup>5</sup> Female spirits who make dire prophesies are common enough, going back at least to the beginning of the first century A.D.,<sup>6</sup> but this fact does not necessarily put

<sup>1</sup> K. Lohmeyer, “Der Traum vom Schatz auf der Coblenzer Brücke”; J. Bolte, “Zur Sage vom Traum vom Schatz auf der Brücke,” *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*, XIX (1909), 286–298.

<sup>2</sup> Stith Thompson, “Motif Index of Folk-Literature,” *FF Communications*, 107, E 272.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, E 215.

<sup>4</sup> E. O'Donnell, *Haunted Places in England* (London, 1919), p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> (London, 1880), pp. 12–18.

<sup>6</sup> L. Collison-Morley, *Greek and Roman Ghost Stories* (London, 1912), pp. 72–75.

Version B, the prophesying woman, back any farther than 1933. Reference has already been made to the basket-carrying female spirit of Germany who jumps on farmers' wagons. She, however, makes no prophesy; nor does the farmer mistake her for a human.<sup>7</sup>

Such tenuous analogies and comparisons are all that we have gained from research into older sources. Our real object, to find examples of the original story or at least a reasonable facsimile from which we could trace the development of our modern legend, has not been attained. On the contrary, our search convinced us that there is a modernity about the elements and the essence of the story of the vanishing hitchhiker which sets it off sharply from the tales of the past. The most significant of the modern elements is the hitchhiker's successful masquerading as a human being. This phenomenon is extremely rare in European ghostly lore of the last few centuries. A few express it halfheartedly,<sup>8</sup> but it never appears as the keystone of a tale which it very definitely does in most of the versions of the original story and in Variant C. Rare examples such as the story of Phillinion and Machates<sup>9</sup> or even the angels whom Abraham mistakes for men<sup>10</sup> might be brought forward to contradict this statement, but these are not European folk tales. We do not say that ghosts who look like humans were absent in Europe before the nineteenth century, but that they were rare.

The essence or point of the original story is even more foreign to European folklore. Today many people relish telling and enjoy listening to this story about a fellow human who, meeting a ghost of deceptively human appearance, suffers an appalling shock when he discovers that he has been in contact with a spirit. But such a tale apparently had no appeal for the inhabitants of Europe until the nineteenth century. It is not till the latter half of the nineteenth century that stories with the tone of the vanishing hitchhiker make their appearance and these in the collections of persons interested in psychical research.<sup>11</sup> Literary ghost stories of the last forty years<sup>12</sup> and modern folklore<sup>13</sup> make frequent use of the human-

<sup>7</sup> K. Reiser, *Sagen des Allgäu*, I, Nos. 104, 114, pp. 112, 119 (Kempten, 1895).

<sup>8</sup> Bächtold-Staubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, III (1930), p. 490.

<sup>9</sup> Collison-Morley, pp. 66-71.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis, 18.

<sup>11</sup> F. W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and its Survivals of Bodily Death*, II, 28, 37, 45-46, 66-67.

<sup>12</sup> E. Wharton, "All Souls," "Afterward," in *Ghosts* (N. Y., 1937), pp. 3-35, 67-112; Mary E. Wilkins, *The Wind in the Rose Bush* (N. Y., 1903); A. Bierce, "The Secret of Macarger's Gulch," "A Jug of Syrup," "A Cold Greeting" in *Can Such Things Be?* (N. Y., 1909).

<sup>13</sup> St. John D. Seymour and Harry L. Neligan, *True Irish Ghost Stories* (2d ed., Dublin, 1926), p. 144; Fred W. Allsop, *Folklore of Romantic Arkansas* (N. Y., 1931), II, 254-255, 259-261; R. Hankey, "California Ghosts" (Nos. 1, 2, 6, 9, 14, 16, 18, 20, 24, 28-40), *California Folklore Quarterly*, I, 156-157.

appearing ghost. It is probable that some form of the story of the vanishing hitchhiker has been told in the southeastern United States for thirty or forty years. Several informants state they heard the story in childhood but cannot remember the details.<sup>14</sup>

If any version has true roots in the past, it is C, the story of the young woman who returns to her grave. With a literary frosting and some emphasis on her wickedness this girl might pass for a vampire or succubus. She is certainly very similar to the girl of Washington Irving's *The Lady with the Velvet Collar*.<sup>15</sup> This story, published in 1824, concerns a young student who lived in Paris during the French Revolution. Late one stormy night he walked past the guillotine and saw a beautiful, disheveled woman sitting on the scaffold, weeping. She was dressed in black and wore a black velvet band around her neck. Thinking she was a homeless aristocrat "whom the dreadful axe had rendered desolate," he entered into conversation with her and eventually took her to his lodgings. Deciding that "ceremonies of marriage are superfluous bonds for honorable minds" she stayed the night. The next morning the student sallied forth to look for a new apartment, since his poor room was not suitable for them both. When he returned she was lying lifeless on the bed. Horrified, he summoned the police.

"Great heaven," cried the officer, "how did this woman come here?"

"Do you know anything about her?" asked the student eagerly.

"Do I!" exclaimed the officer. "She was guillotined yesterday." He stepped forward, undid the velvet collar and the head rolled on the floor. The student, believing he had pledged himself to the fiend, burst into a frenzy, went distracted, and died in a madhouse.

We do not consider that this story gave rise either to the original story or to Version C, although it or some similar story may have had influence. Without the evidence of our analysis of the elements of the tale or our dated versions, it would be logical to assume that Version C was the original story from which the other versions grew. By selecting stories showing ever increasing archaization it would be possible to construct a convincing evolutionary sequence reaching back to the succubus or female demon of medieval Europe. But all our objective evidence contradicts this idea. No characteristic C version was heard before 1938. To the

<sup>14</sup> Hankey, "California Ghosts" (No. 22); also "South Carolina Folk Tales," *Bulletin of the University of South Carolina*, October, 1941, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Also under the title "The Adventure of the German Student," *Tales of a Traveller*, (Author's revised ed., N. Y., 1849), pp. 55-62. In the preface to this edition Irving remarks that the latter part of this story is based on an anecdote related to him as current somewhere in France.

results of our element list we add the fact that the simple story of the harmless hitchhiking ghost was widely spread over the United States by the late nineteen-twenties.

#### THE VANISHING HITCHHIKER AS A MODERN TALE

The problems arising from this analysis have inevitably stimulated theories to solve at least some of them; these also may shed light on the more general problems of folklore. We hold that (1) the vanishing hitchhiker is a modern story, showing features of the contemporary tale and reflecting contemporary civilization (a) in the details of each narration, (b) in the processes and final picture of its diffusion from its source, and (c) in comparison with similar but unrelated, modern stories; also, that (2) these numerous versions of a single story throw some light on the general characteristics of present-day storytelling.

The authors see the major worth of this study in its detailed presentation of a story that is in no sense a survival from an outdated culture, but stands as a fullfledged representative of the contemporary tale. Research into extant literature suggests possible sources for specific elements but not for the integral core or spirit of the story. Even if such should eventually come to light, the vanishing hitchhiker is nonetheless a *Sage* of the present day and its characteristics as such are instructive.

The versions clearly demonstrate the dependence of the story on features peculiar to contemporary civilization, features whose natural acceptance is essential to successful narration. We see nothing strange in the use of automobiles over long distances, traveling to such gigantic enterprises as the Century of Progress World's Fair, nothing exotic in the casual intimacy between complete strangers which hitchhiking implies, no breach of etiquette in making a pickup at a dance. Yet these features would be incomprehensible to an European of two centuries ago or to a participant in a different culture. The fact that only two versions<sup>16</sup> lack these modern appurtenances confirms this impression. In addition, the changes which occurred in areas with divergent cultural traditions<sup>17</sup> supply evidence that this story is intimately associated with a society like that of modern America.

With the *Sage* our tale shares the factual reportorial character of narration, the effort to sound true to life through reference to specific localities and everyday happenings. But the analysis has brought to light some

<sup>16</sup> See R. Beardsley and R. Hankey, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" (Nos. 21, 22), *California Folklore Quarterly*, I, 328-329.

<sup>17</sup> See Nos. 4, 17, 34, *ibid.*, pp. 307, 326, 332.

aspects in which the tale contrasts with the traditional *Sage* of European literature and with the primitive tales that have served to illustrate theory in folklore. Our characters are almost without exception anonymous. The story betrays its urban or megalopolitan origin in identifying characters by their trade or circumstance, e.g., taxi driver, young doctor, family en route to Chicago; it is not a story told in a small community where people are known by name. One Honolulu version in which the hitchhiker is "Marion Crawford" is an exception.<sup>18</sup>

The age-area hypothesis underlying the study of primitive tales assumes that each tale has a single source, from which it radiates in wave-like transmission, arriving at increasingly distant points at successively later periods. But the vanishing hitchhiker does not lend itself to such a scheme. We assume similarly that our tale had a single origin but we are convinced that its spread has been astonishingly rapid, reaching from one extremity of the continent to another in an incredibly short time. Localized developments in its theme are comparatively absent. From the distribution and the dated versions of the vanishing hitchhiker it is evident that the variants have jumped from one locality to another, spreading a random, sometimes discontinuous, network of occurrences over the entire territory of the story. In less than a year a variant has made its appearance on opposite borders of the continent and may well have gone beyond to other parts of the world. We have not yet been able to collect versions in Europe, South America, and Canada,<sup>19</sup> but we should not be surprised to find the story in any part of the so-called civilized world. It is even conceivable that a later version could be more widespread than an earlier one. In judging relative age, we have found the dating of stories far more reliable than their range of distribution. The function of rapid transportation and instantaneous communication over long distances (automobile, newspaper, telegraph, radio) in producing this type of distribution is obvious. Most of us can cite parallels to this swift diffusion using other items of popular literature; perhaps off-color stories, jokes, and limericks provide the best demonstration.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See No. 35, *ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>19</sup> A story supposedly told in London, England, is strongly reminiscent of the hitchhiker. A woman dressed in white accosts a doctor from a taxicab as he is walking home late at night. He goes with her to an address she gives, where he discovers as he gets out of the cab that she has disappeared. When he rings the bell, he is told by the butler that there is no need for a doctor there. Out of curiosity he returns the next morning and learns that although his presence the night before is not remembered, it was indeed necessary. The master of the house had died. As he waits in a side room to examine the body, he sees a photograph of the woman in white; he is told that the picture is that of the master's wife, dead for ten years.

<sup>20</sup> An additional factor in this is purposeful dissemination, seen, e.g., in election campaign

Nevertheless, the nucleus-and-periphery theory of diffusion has allowed cautious guesses as to the age of some elements. Clearly enough, the weakness of such inferences lies in the incompleteness of our sampling; it is always possible that versions yet to be noted from our blank areas will change the picture. But at present, for example, we hold that the prophetic warning (localized in the Midwest) and the cemetery incident (found in Salt Lake City and southern California) are late partly because of their restricted distribution.

Certain of the localized features are not likely to spread to other regions because they concern peculiarities of the place where they are told. They add local color to the story: the Century of Progress World's Fair is Chicagoan; the well-known ferry building and the cable cars are unmistakably San Franciscan; Waikiki Beach identifies Hawaii. The temper of two variants in Hawaii has been utterly transformed, because in the Islands an old woman carrying a basket corresponds to the traditional guise of the goddess Pelee.<sup>21</sup> In other words, native culture has dominated the story and changed it. From Mexico, on the other hand, we have a variant<sup>22</sup> which has not changed, in spite of the fact that the hitchhiker is a girl alone on the highway, unaccompanied by a dueña. In this contra-vention of established culture pattern the story has triumphed; but the narrator was impelled to explain afterward in detail why no dueña appeared.<sup>23</sup>

Because the vanishing hitchhiker is at bottom a ghost story, the modernity of its ghost gives strong evidence of the essential contemporaneity of the tale.<sup>24</sup> And since it is only one of numberless modern tales, its

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jokes on the opposing party, or in the libelous stories concerning manufacturers known as "whispering campaigns." But stories told just for the fun of it illustrate the point as well. One known to the authors, for example, is a limerick composed in Berkeley in the spring of 1938, told on Puget Sound that summer, repeated in Boston the same autumn. An interesting agent of diffusion which may have operated in this example is the stockbroker's private telegraph line which is continuously open between the exchanges of the Pacific and the Atlantic coasts. When there are no business items to be transmitted, the line is traditionally kept busy with the latest jokes heard at either end.

These examples raise the question of whether the stimuli to the spread of the "vanishing hitchhiker" lay in its being told for fun or in its "psychic" qualities. We recorded a number of versions which obviously had impressed the narrator as being enjoyable; on the other hand, a number were as obviously struck by the ghostly character of the "true story." Probably both factors operate as stimuli.

<sup>21</sup> Beardsley and Hankey, *op. cit.* (Nos. 4, 17), pp. 307, 326.

<sup>22</sup> See No. 34, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

<sup>23</sup> Professor Boas has repeatedly stressed the way in which folk literature reflects the culture in which it is told, giving ample demonstration of the proposition in his analysis of Indian culture from Indian mythology (*Tsimshian Mythology, Thirty-first Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Washington, 1916).

<sup>24</sup> See pp. 14-15 of this article.

characteristics are frequently duplicated elsewhere. We should like to discuss two other tales which have come to our attention repeatedly, in order to suggest them as suitable for similar analysis in their own right as well as, by comparison, to delineate further characteristics of the vanishing hitchhiker. Although each concerns the actions of a strange hitchhiker, we have found no evidence that either is specifically allied with our tale.

The story of the "hitchhiking thug" was current throughout the United States around 1930, but apparently has now died out. Its spread may have been as extensive as that of the vanishing hitchhiker. The following version was told in Ontario, California:

"A man out driving saw an old lady with a basket. He offered her a ride. As she got in the back seat, he noticed the cuff of trousers under her skirt. He diplomatically inquired, 'Does it get very cold around here?' There was no answer. The man continued, 'You have on flannel trousers.' With this, the old lady, who was really a man, pulled a gun out of her basket and held up the driver."

The tenor of this story is quite different from that of the vanishing hitchhiker. The old woman is in reality a man, there is no disappearance, and the story in no sense relates to psychic phenomena. At first blush there seems no point in comparing the two apparently unrelated stories. But we ask the reader to refer to our discussion of constituent elements with the story in mind; he will find that the driver (in a car) is a lone man, that the hitchhiker is ostensibly an old woman who carries a basket, that she climbs into the back seat.<sup>25</sup> In short, a number of specific details are duplicated, although the majority of episodic categories remains unfilled. This serves to illustrate both the strength and weakness of such an element distribution list. As to strength, we hold it quite possible that the corroborative details may indicate contact between the two stories in an area where our basket-carrying old woman is known, with resultant contamination. As to weakness, we recognize that the analysis of any tale cannot rest on details alone, but must consider the general tenor and the meaning of that tale as well. While the narrator of the vanishing hitchhiker has in mind, "What strange things we meet in this everyday world!", the raconteur of the hitchhiking thug incident is clearly thinking, "Let this be a warning against picking up stray hitchhikers." This consideration has increased our caution against overreliance on the elements of the story alone. For our study the acceptance of any story has been guided by "thematic" analysis as well.

<sup>25</sup> Beardsley and Hankey, *op. cit.*, pp. 309, 310, 311.



In an article devoted to it, the second of these comparable tales has been entitled, "The Corpse in the Car."<sup>26</sup> Our evidence indicates its recent growth (earliest date, 1937)<sup>27</sup> and spread to America from Europe. But for the warning of experience it would be tempting to assign a specific cause for its origin. We present a version recorded in a San Francisco newspaper:<sup>28</sup>

"Bluffton, Ind., Jan. 25 (1942).—Mrs. Robert Nuddin of Elwood, Ind., related this story here today: She and her husband, driving to Indianapolis to visit her sister, Mrs. August Leimgruber, saw an old man walking along the road and gave him a ride. 'I have no money to pay for your kindness,' he said as he left the car. 'But I can answer any question you may wish to ask.' Nuddin asked when the war would end. 'That's easy,' said the man. 'It will end in July.' The Nuddins laughed but the hitchhiker repeated his prediction and said it would come true as surely 'as you will have a dead man in your car before you reach home.'

"Near Indianapolis an ambulance passed the Nuddin car, skidded and overturned in a ditch. The driver asked Nuddin to take the patient to a hospital in Indianapolis. The patient was dead on arrival."

The striking resemblance in theme between this and Version B of the vanishing hitchhiker induced us to search for more versions. But the story is highly variable, and the variant which we present has as close similarity as any. The Princess Marie, in her study of twelve variants, regards this tale as of "the rank of a collective myth," interpreting its psychological aspects as related not only to the war but to sacrifice as an element in human history.<sup>29</sup> The injured person is a symbolic sacrifice. We prefer to regard this story as a *Sage*, comparable to the *Sage* of the vanishing hitchhiker.

Two highly instructive variants were recorded in Chicago in December, 1941, and in San Francisco in March, 1942, which very neatly combine features of the "corpse in the car" with elements of the "vanishing hitchhiker," and also bear resemblance to the story of "the helpful saint."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Marie Bonaparte, Princess of Greece, "The Myth of the Corpse in the Car," *American Imago*, II (July, 1941).

<sup>27</sup> *Time*, "Letters to the Editor column," 34:2, November 20, 1939.

<sup>28</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 26, 1942.

<sup>29</sup> Her interpretation rests on the use of an automobile and the accompanying accident in each of her variants. It is not so much a denial of value to the psychological approach as an insistence on the importance of a large collection to point out that her conclusions would not possibly have been the same if she had similarly to account for variants involving street cars, which reinforce the prediction of Hitler's death with exact statements as to the amount of money in each passenger's purse or wallet. These versions are recorded in *Time*.

<sup>30</sup> For two versions, see R. Hankey, *op. cit.* (Nos. 1 and 2), p. 163.

*Chicago, Illinois, 1941.*—This mysterious story went the rounds here last winter, and I first heard it from “a friend who heard it from a friend in Chicago who had heard it from her neighbor.”

Mike, the cab driver, tells this story of a mysterious fare he had in early December. Cruising on a street in downtown Chicago he picked up an elderly Sister of some Catholic order and was told to take her to ——— street. He had his radio on and they talked about Pearl Harbor for a while. She said, “It won’t last more than four months.” Then they drove on and Mike drew up at the address. Jumping out to open the cab door he was surprised to find no one there. Afraid the little old lady had “jumped” her fare, he hastened to inquire at the address. It was a convent and when questioned by the Superior in charge Mike told of the little lady who had disappeared and hadn’t paid her fare. “What did she look like?” the Superior asked, and explained that no Sister from the convent had been down town that day. As Mike described her, he happened to look at a picture hanging on the wall behind the Superior’s desk. “That’s her,” Mike said, and thought to himself that he would get the fare after all. But the Mother Superior smiled quietly and said, “But she has been dead for ten years.”

The only thing wrong with the story is that it’s over four months since they dreamed it up and the war isn’t over yet.

*San Francisco, California, 1942.*—The police investigated the story as told by a taxicab driver who came to the police station to see if he were crazy. He had picked up a fare on Mission Street, a lone nun, and taken her to the house of her order. He thought nothing of her being alone as he did not realize that nuns travel severally in public. En route she asked him about the war, and he said it looked bad. She replied, “Well, it will end in September.” When they reached the convent, she had no money for her fare, so she went inside to get some. The driver waited half an hour in vain for her return and then rang the bell. The Sister in charge of the door told him that no one had been away and that the door had not been opened all evening. As the door swung farther open, the driver saw the lighted interior. Suddenly he pointed, saying, “There she is.” He was pointing at a life-size statue of the Blessed Virgin which stood in the entrance hall. After the Sister explained the identity of the image, he went to the police station to check on his sanity.

Little comment is necessary to show the relationship of this story to the “corpse in the car” or the “vanishing hitchhiker.” A prediction con-

cerning the end of the war is made by a being above skeptical inquiry; for this reason she need not certify the prophecy by the minor prediction of the corpse in the car. Moreover, the traveler is a woman, is driven to an address she gives, and disappears. One of the Saint's stories mentioned involves a prediction by a canonized person who manifests himself for this end. Thus the traits of all three stories are present and any or all may have been concerned in the growth of this tale.

However, it is the vanishing hitchhiker traits which are of primary importance to us as their presence here represents one of their few recent appearances. Although some hitchhiker stories have been volunteered to us without inquiry, most original versions had to be asked for and had been heard by our narrators before 1939. The incident almost invariably is supposed to have happened some time ago. In short, the story is dying out. Though still told occasionally, it is no longer a vital and living tale.

It is characteristic of modern tales that they are popular for a period but subject to decay and eventual death. Our jokes and dirty stories likewise enjoy an ephemeral season and then pass to limbo. So do the stories which fill the magazines and books that crowd the corner drugstore racks. This trait of modern tales stands in contrast to the more or less standard literature of a primitive community. The primitive narrators can assimilate new products as they are slowly added, but continue to tell the old stories in much the same way. Changes take place over some generations, but there is no mass dying out to correlate with the mass production which our society shows.

Yet one can never be sure that a story is completely dead. No matter how brief its popularity, nor how trivial its theme, it may persist in a few memories long after its disappearance from every tongue and may emerge to give rise to a quite altered story. In being told, it becomes a part of culture; it continues to form a part of that culture and to reflect it in its own form.<sup>31</sup>

#### INFORMATION ON STORYTELLING INDICATED BY THIS COLLECTION

At least two major factors are responsible for the stylistic traits which mark the telling of the vanishing hitchhiker. The first is that it is the common property of persons of every age and class. Since no specialized group of storytellers is concerned with preserving the original details and

<sup>31</sup> Boas, *op. cit.* These stories are remarkably sensitive to subtle changes in culture. They reflect not merely the objective facts, but the interests and drives of the people who tell them. The change in ten years from a story about the World's Fair to a story about the war, as one example, mirrors an actual cultural change.

shading in every successive narration, the story is frequently abbreviated to its core. This streamlined skeleton has remained constant throughout the life of the story. Our collection includes variants heard early in the nineteen-twenties which correspond almost identically to those told at the end of the nineteen-thirties. This consistency through at least twenty years is attributable in part to the shortness of the story; it involves only a single major episode.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to this consistency of outline is the variation of details, which are added, changed, or dropped in each successive telling. The elaboration which does occur in certain variants is sometimes expertly, sometimes clumsily handled, but it is rarely preserved. We have been able to trace the following story through several such changes; repeated by the same narrator on two different occasions, it was later used in a radio broadcast.

*Earliest Telling.*<sup>33</sup>—A young man picked up a girl at College Avenue and Bancroft Way, in Berkeley. He took her to an address on Durant Avenue. She disappeared. On inquiry, he found that she was the deceased daughter of a professor of the University of California.

*Second Telling.*—As a car slowed down at the corner of Bancroft Way and College Avenue, a girl signalled for a ride. She was picked up by two students, a fellow and his girl. It was a rainy evening. They asked her where she was going and she gave them her address. When they arrived, they turned around and found she was not in the car. They rang the doorbell and found that she was a professor's daughter, killed in an accident at the corner of Bancroft and College, several years before. Each year on the anniversary of her death, she appears and gets a ride.

*Radio Version* (taken from one of the above stories).—If you live in Berkeley, perhaps the thing happened right there . . . A little girl . . . was standing by a traffic light on the corner of Telegraph Avenue and Bancroft Way. She seemed hesitant to venture into traffic, and finally a motorist picked her up and took her to the home of a well-known doctor who, she said, was her father. Of course, the girl disappeared on the way, and the doctor told the motorist that his daughter had been killed a month before in a traffic accident at Telegraph and Bancroft.

<sup>32</sup> Brevity of narration may also be assigned another cause, though this alternative interpretation cannot be easily defended. The stories may be reflecting a modern trend in literature, being brief and factual in the same way that newspaper and radio accounts of incidents are terse.

<sup>33</sup> Reprinted from Hankey, *op. cit.*

This example reproduces in miniature the history of the vanishing hitchhiker. No change has occurred in the main outline but almost every detail has been modified, and the sum of changes has given an altered feeling to the end product.

It is possible, in fact, for a complete transformation of the spirit of the story to occur simply through the change of a single detail. Some of our Version A stories would duplicate Version B variants merely by the addition of a prophetic warning, and we believe that Version B arose in this way. But as a consequence of this single addition, Version B tends to acquire a whole set of new and unique details to fit the change in emphasis from disappearance to prediction.

Besides the evolutionary changes shown within a single tale, we have examples of cross-fertilization between stories in our A-contaminated group. Various narrators at one time probably heard both Version A and Version C, and in some cases simply exchanged elements, or imparted the macabre temper of C to what was still an A version in details. Others apparently amalgamated the two bodily, without essential loss to either.<sup>34</sup> A remarkable example of contamination between two separate strains is the story of the war-predicting hitchhiker from San Francisco and Chicago.<sup>35</sup>

The second major factor operating on the form and style of the story is especially significant because it is unique to modern circumstances; it is the narrative broadcast by newspaper, magazine, and radio. Through these agencies, a single narration has the effect of hundreds, being read or heard simultaneously by large numbers of people. In this way, a long period in the diffusion of a tale is telescoped into a few moments, with the difference that the tale remains absolutely uniform in this large scale dissemination.<sup>36</sup> But the effect on the distribution and variability of a story, though considerable, is impossible to judge precisely. Seventeen of our variants were recorded from print or the radio, or from narrators who knew such variants. Within a small area, this would obviously upset distributional analysis. But our study shows that from a continental point of view, localization and variation do occur. Hence this factor of broadcast transmission is not all-important, though it must always be taken into account.

<sup>34</sup> Beardsley and Hankey, *op. cit.* (No. 35), p. 333.

<sup>35</sup> See stories on p. 21 of this article.

<sup>36</sup> Yet the radio version does not necessarily correspond to the antecedent popular version. See stories on the preceding page.

We believe that the large numbers and heterogeneity of our narrators probably gave the stories their tendency toward abbreviated form. On the one hand a basic skeleton may develop which remains constant throughout the life of the story, while the details are varied. On the other hand, a single detail may bring about gradual transformation of the skeleton. These changes may be initiated or even completed by a single narrator.<sup>37</sup> In addition, newspapers, magazines, and radio exert important influence on modern stories, creating a manifold version in an instant.

### SUMMARY

From this introductory study of seventy-nine variants of the vanishing hitchhiker has come a number of observations and working hypotheses. While the story appears to have had a single origin (although we cannot yet identify its locality with certainty), the original version has produced several major branches. Version A is closest to the original story; Version B and Version D exist in two separate localities as derivants, while Version C, a probable derivant, is more widespread. The conclusion that they are related is supported by distribution, by frequency and by date of telling. All versions have been widely diffused and have maintained uniform features in each part of their areas, although localized motifs can be traced. The main story enjoyed a currency of no more than twenty years and is now out of vogue, perhaps because it is replaced by more timely stories of hitchhiking.

The vanishing hitchhiker is in essence a modern ghost story; it may have drawn on older sources but it gained its individuality and began its spread only as a modern story, drawing on our own cultural scene. Although a *Sage*, it is definitely divergent in some features from the traditional European *Sagen*, whereas it shares many characteristics with other modern stories. Among these are an urban, impersonal quality, dependence on elements and customs of present-day society, and especial peculiarities of distribution. The last are traceable in part to specialized agencies of diffusion which were lacking to oral literature of an earlier day. This is no more than a preliminary study of a story whose rich material should amply repay further investigation.

<sup>37</sup> The characteristics of this collection closely parallel some of the results obtained experimentally by F. C. Bartlett. Professor Bartlett had various individuals repeat an American Indian tale on successive occasions in order to determine the influence of the narrator on his subject matter. The results have been summarized by Dr. E. J. Lindgren (F. C. Bartlett, M. Ginsburg, E. J. Lindgren, R. H. Thouless, *The Study of Society, Methods and Problems* [1939], pp. 369 ff.).