

## THE SURPRISE SURPRISED: A MODERN LEGEND

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ABSTRACT -- What follows is a modern legend, presented in twenty-eight variants with diverse comment upon some of those variants. This legend has a demonstrable life span of forty-five years and is possibly much older. The variants here presented were heard in an area that spreads from Utah to Wales and from Texas to Massachusetts. The non-appearance of states and countries indicates only, I would guess, a lack of collecting or publication of modern legends in those areas. The twenty-eight variants seem to justify the inference that this legend has split into three versions or sub-types, one of which may imply the absorption into our legend of another more recent legend.

I first encountered this narrative in 1935, I think in December. A Junior Master in a prep school, I was lounging with several students in the suite of our House Master, David Thomas. Ghost stories and eerie personal experiences were being repeated. After a desultory pause, Dave volunteered to tell a true story (they are always true stories, of course). This is the story as I heard Dave perform it then and several other times during the next eighteen months. Perform is particularly apt for David Thomas, for his narration was very precise, marked by almost literary sentences, profuse gestures, facial animation, and darting glances at various auditors -- and, seemingly, great personal conviction. Although he talked dramatically, his narrative speed was considerably slower, more measured, than his normal conversation rate.

A-1

(Collected in Massachusetts, but evidently recently from New Jersey. Collected in December, 1935.)

This happened about a year ago. The girl's family lives in the town where my brother teaches, in North Jersey. She commuted, lived at home, helped out her family. They didn't have much, ever since the Crash. My brother says, "A nice girl, real quiet, shy."

She'd been engaged forever to this fellow who worked in the same office with her. Poor kids, they couldn't afford to get married. He lived in the City and helped his folks. But being in love, being in the same office, all that, they saw a lot of each other. They celebrated everything together: Christmas, New Year's, Labor Day, the 4th of July, his birthday, her birthday, even their anniversary -- you know, anniversary for their engagement. And this had been going on for some time, maybe three-four years.

About a year ago in the spring, her birthday was coming up and it was going to be on a Saturday, and her boy friend, he wanted to do something big for her. Maybe on her birthday she would stay in the City and they could go to a matinee and then have dinner and

dance in Chinatown and he'd ride out to Jersey with her afterwards on the milk train. The late trains are sort of fun on Saturday nights.

But she was practical -- good, common-sense kind of girl, and she said no, they couldn't afford it. But she had an idea. She thought the boss would give her Saturday morning off and she'd stay home and shop and cook him the best meal he ever had and he could come out on the early afternoon train and they'd have most of the day to themselves, just the two of them. Well, he protested. He wanted to do something -- it was her birthday, wasn't it? But the next day he gave in and they went ahead with her plan.

And on her birthday he came out from the City and went to her house and brought her chocolates and flowers. And they sat around and talked and had a good time with her parents until just before dinner time, to his surprise, her parents got up and left for the evening so he and the girl could be together. And they had just a real nice dinner, lace tablecloth, candles and everything -- and she had cooked a real meal. Finally about half past seven she says, "I've got a present for you. It's upstairs. I'll go and get it and bring it down to you in the living room."

And he says, "Well, gee, you didn't have to do that. This meal's enough. Besides it's your birthday." Says, "I'll tell you what, let me help you with the dishes, first."

She argues a little bit, but when he says, "Just like we're married," she gives in and they do the dishes.

By this time it's way after 8 o'clock and she says, "Can I give you your present now?"

"Oh, sure," he said and went around turning off the lights.

She went to her room and took off all her clothes. I don't think she was desperate or anything like that -- it was just she was so much in love and he was so patient. Anyway, here she came, without a stitch on, down the stairs in the dark and into the middle of the living room. And she said, sort of embarrassed, I suppose, "You can turn the lights on now, Henry."

And he did, and there was everybody from their office, jumping up and screaming, "Surprise! Surprise!" Henry had brought them there to give her a surprise birthday party.

Well, she fainted dead away. And when she came to, she couldn't recognize anybody. Still can't. She's in the State Asylum. They say she's hopeless.

Isn't that something? Isn't it awful? Can you just imagine?

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As I was to realize over the years, this is an excellent representative of what I deem the main form of the legend, though probably not the oldest form. O. Henry-like irony and all, this variant has about all the features that appear in one or another of the other forms of what I shall call sub-type A. The narrator's attitude implies a horror at the misfiring of good intentions, a sympathy with the couple's plight caused by the long delay of their marriage (forget not that 1935 was still within the Great Depression), a tacit approval (or understanding at least) of the physical aspects of sex (how meally-mouthed can a scholar be?), and a kind of testimony to the bad luck inherent in what Thompson's Motif-Index (Chapter U) dubs "The Nature of Life." The occasion upon which the event occurs is an anniversary, as it is in every one of the fifteen variants of A; in fact, it is the girl's birthday, as it is in seven of the fifteen. The aftermath of the event here is tragic, as it is in nine of the fifteen; it is insanity specifically, as in six of those nine.

In sub-type A there are several persistent details. Unexpected, embarrassing exposure of one or more people in the nude is, of course, a crux in all but one variant of A and can hardly be called a mere detail. But in this, as in seven other variants, the exposure is preceded by a descent down a staircase into the dark -- a symbol which could certainly warm the heart of a Freudian or, for that matter, of a fundamentalist. Also in this variant the instigator of the unfortunately abortive sexual action is the female, as it is in three other accounts and as the male erroneously thinks it is in yet three more variants.

#### A-2

(Collected in Kentucky from a woman who had heard it from her husband in 1959 in Illinois at a story-telling session. Another participant in the same 1959 session insisted the event had taken place in St. Louis and "even named the institution in which the girl had been confined." The man the informant's husband had heard it from "had sworn that it had actually happened in Decatur and that the girl had been committed to an institution in Jacksonville, Illinois." The informant reported that her brothers in East Chicago, Indiana, also knew the tale.)

A young couple had been engaged for a short time and were soon to be married. They were spending the evening together in her home, alone. For some reason they were both naked. While in this condition, they decided to go down into the basement to look over their wedding gifts. He was carrying her down the steps when suddenly the lights went on and a bunch of people yelled, "Surprise!" The girl had a nervous breakdown and was committed to an institution.

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In this passive, summary, fragmentary variant, the important thing, perhaps, is what has not been summarized, but kept in full detail: the fact they were to be married; the boy, naked, carrying the girl, naked, down the stairs into the dark basement; and the tragic insanity. This is the first time that we encounter the carrying motif, which occurs in many variants, and the first time both boy and girl are naked. In such a passive form of the story it is hard to derive the narrator's attitude, but perhaps the mention of the wedding gifts would imply the presence of sympathy for

the couple and again a sense that theirs was tough luck.

### A-3

(Collected in Kentucky from a girl who had heard it in 1959 and believed it had happened in Somerset. The same informant had also heard it about the same couple in Somerset but with the occasion being a bridal shower.)

There was a young couple of well-to-do families who were engaged to be married. On the girl's birthday, the two of them went out, but returned home rather early. Upon returning to the girl's home it was discovered that the parents were away. The two of them decided to do something "different" and removed all their clothing. Soon thereafter, the telephone rang. When she answered it, the girl was asked by her mother to please go to the basement and turn off the automatic washer, which she had forgotten. When the conversation ended, one of the couple decided it would be fun if the boy carried the girl downstairs piggyback. This they proceeded to do, and when they reached the bottom of the stairs, the lights came on and a large group of friends and relatives yelled, "Surprise!" The girl, I was told, had a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized. The boy has neither been seen nor heard of since.

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This variant differs little from the preceding ones, except that it introduces piggyback transportation, a detail that stuck in several narrators' minds. Also, it very carefully establishes the fact that neither member of the couple instigated the sexual play. It is probably intended that this innocence should be remembered so that it will increase the shock when the hearer learns that both young people suffered tragedy as a result of the well-intentioned Surprise. (Usually, if a tragic end is specified in the narrative it is for the girl alone.)

A most passive and pallid form is:

### A-4

(Collected in Kentucky from a girl who heard it in 1961 in North Platte, Nebraska.)

A young couple, recently married, were living with the parents of one of them. The mother was leaving for downtown and asked them if they would go down to the basement at a prescribed time and take the laundry out of the dryer. This they did, but in a state of nakedness, and when they reached the basement, the lights were turned on and a group of their friends were on hand for a party in honor of their marriage.

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Although the story retains the outlines, it has lost most of its motivation and all of its point. It still keeps the Freudian symbolism, but is almost an example of how not to tell a tale.

The next, although also passive and too compact, retains most of the points from some of the better-told variants.

#### A-5

(Collected in Kentucky, heard in 1961 at a party, no particular locale mentioned.)

A girl and a boy are going together. The girl's family are away for the weekend. She invites her boy friend over. In the course of the evening's lovemaking they decide to go upstairs to bed. After a time they hear noises. They both get up and in the nude go downstairs to investigate. Suddenly all the lights are turned on. The girl's friends have come to give her a surprise birthday party. This shattering experience is the end of this romance.

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Certainly, here the suggestion is that the girl is the instigator and there is implicit in the last sentence, perhaps, a bit of moral censure. Interestingly, it might be pointed out that this variant was collected by a girl from a girl who had heard it from a girl.

#### A-6

(Collected in Kentucky in 1970; heard in Louisville.)

A girl was invited to spend the night with her best friend, whose family was on vacation. On arriving at her friend's house, the invited girl was met with a note from her friend saying that she had gone to Cincinnati with an old boy friend who had shown up unexpectedly. The note said that she would be home about three or four A.M. and she still wanted the girl to stay.

The invited girl did not want to stay in the house by herself; so she called her boy friend and asked him to come over. One thing led to another and soon they were both stripped down to the nude. All at once a key turned in the lock and the girl's friend burst in, accompanied by about ten of their mutual friends, yelling, "Surprise!" They had arranged a surprise birthday party for the girl, whose birthday was in a few days.

The boy left town soon after and the girl is said to have had a mental collapse.

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Although the symbolism has disappeared and the story has lost some organization, it does insist upon the girl's loneliness, it does stress that she is the instigator of the sexual play (both of these are important details in the C version of our story), and it thrashes around to make the point that the event marked an anniversary, or nearly so. In the last sentence, the announcement of a double tragedy may also imply at least a leaning toward the that's-tough-but-that's-the-way-life-is philosophy. And need I point out that such a philosophy is a prerequisite to the Evil Eye syndrome?

The next variant has a strange origin. It was left on a reel of tape in gratitude by a young man who had borrowed the tape recorder. The owner of the tape recorder transcribed the story as a gift to me and accompanied it with a note that the teller "swears to the truth of the story; he knows the couple." The style, of course, smacks more of English Composition 101 than of oral-aural narration. Yet the variant is remarkably complete and it does introduce a fortuitous religious element that is one of the persistent details of both Version A and Version C.

## A-7

(Recorded in 1970 in Kentucky.)

It seems that not long ago a young couple were engaged to be married. At the time when the following events occurred the two were to be married in less than two months.

Sherry was a very shy, unassuming girl. She had led a fairly sheltered life until she met Ricky. Sherry's father was a deacon in one of the churches in town and she was also an only child.

Ricky, on the other hand, was a boy of pretty wide experience. He was as loud as Sherry was quiet and had been quite a hell-raiser until he met Sherry and asked her to marry him.

It seems that Sherry and Ricky were at her home one afternoon several weeks before the wedding. They were sitting in the parlor conversing pleasantly with Sherry's parents when her parents decided to go visit the preacher at the parsonage.

"Now, Sherry," her mother said, "we'll be back in about three hours. I've just put some clothes into the washing machine and they'll be finished in thirty minutes. Would you go downstairs and put the load into the dryer?"

Sherry agreed. Her parents then left to visit the preacher. The couple, with some time on their hands, proceeded to engage in a little premarital sex. After twenty-five minutes or so of love-making, Sherry remembered the wet clothes. Ricky, however, was somewhat reluctant to run downstairs and put the clothes into the dryer. He tried unsuccessfully to talk Sherry out of going downstairs. Sherry began to put her clothes back on, but Ricky, with unflinching logic, suggested that they both go downstairs as they were. Getting dressed, he pointed out, and then getting undressed again upstairs was really a waste of time. Sherry hesitated but then agreed. Ricky began to tease her and the two broke into uncontrollable laughter. In the spirit of the moment Sherry rode downstairs on Ricky's shoulders. Giggling and carrying on, the two reached the foot of the stairs and Ricky flicked on the lights in the dark basement. There, before the couple, were Sherry's two aunts, uncles, several cousins, the preacher, the members of the church choir, and several other family friends. It seems that Sherry's parents had planned to surprise the engaged couple with a shower.

Both parties gasped and Sherry screamed. Ricky quickly turned the lights off again, dumped Sherry from his shoulders and the two ran back upstairs and slammed the stair door behind them. Downstairs the parents somehow managed to dismiss the shocked shower party. Upstairs and clothed, Ricky was trying to calm the hysterical Sherry. Her parents came upstairs and the girl's father told Ricky it was time that he left. Exit Ricky. Soon afterward Sherry suffered a nervous breakdown and the engagement was broken.

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The characterization of the young couple is unusually full, but it coincides with what is implicit in some other variants. There seems to be a conscious flouting of religion (her father was a deacon, her parents were visiting the preacher, the preacher was present at the denouement) -- and perhaps just a suggestion that the tragedy would not have been so great were the religious condemnation of sex and nudity less severe. The symbolism of the piggyback ride down the stairs into the dark, with both partners nude, is enhanced by the fact that it is the young man himself who turns on the light! In this connection, note that the young man, rather than the young woman, is the instigator of the sexual play in this variant.

A-8

(Recorded in 1967 in Kentucky from a girl who had heard it in North Carolina.)

Gosh, one time there was a couple that had just gotten into their new house. They immediately went upstairs, took off their clothes and went to bed. Unfortunately the phone rang downstairs -- so -- nude, and still clinging to each other, they both went downstairs in the dark to answer the phone. When they reached the bottom of the stairs all the lights flicked on and a group of friends and neighbors yelled, "Surprise!"

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This passive, harmless form contains little of interest except the rather startling preservation within its innocuousness of the Freudian naked journey down into the dark.

The next four variants have almost enough in common and are almost sufficiently different from A-1 through A-8 to warrant setting them up as a separate version. In each, the occasion is his birthday; in each, he thinks erroneously that she is the instigator and, thus willingly deluded, he becomes the instigator; in each, sexual appetite seems to be implicitly decried rather than sympathized with; and, in each, the narrative has become nearly a joke than a legend. Note the opening of:

A-9

(Collected in Kentucky from a young lady who had heard it in 1962.)

I heard this story as a joke. In this version, the setting was an office, the two main characters being a female secretary and a new male accountant.

The secretary was a single, very attractive young woman and the man promptly asked her out. She refused him many times and he became more and more determined to win her favor and take her out.

Finally, after many weeks of consistent efforts, the secretary approached the man and invited him to her apartment for dinner. All through the meal she hinted at a surprise for him. Instantly drawing his own conclusions, the man became very excited.

After dinner she excused herself and stated that she was going to prepare for the surprise. Completely mistaking her true meaning for one of a sexual nature, the man removes all his clothes and when she asks him if he is ready, he immediately answers yes and she flings the door open, revealing the entire office staff, gathered to celebrate his birthday.

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A-9 suggests a moral judgement and a practical judgement. The young man was blinded by his sexual passion. We laugh at him because he is naked, rather than cringing at his misfortune as we did in A-1. We laugh at him, too, because he made a mistake, and all prior evidence should have helped him to avoid the mistake.

#### A-10

(one of the two conventionally-published variants of this legend, A-10 appeared in J. M. Elgard, ed., More over Sixteen [New York: Grayson Publishing Company, 1953], p. 50.)

The boss of a medium-sized office hired a steno who was out of this world. She had looks, personality and clothes. After looking at her for a few weeks, the boss, a married man, decided that he was going to take her out some night. He approached her and asked if she would like to celebrate his birthday with him at some secluded night spot. She said she would have to think about it.

The next day she consented to go, but offered they go to her apartment. To himself, as any other normal man would have commented, "Better than I planned."

The night of his birthday they went to her apartment and had cocktails, appetizers, dinner, and some drinks. After a short time she said: "I'm going to my bedroom, honey, and you can come in in five minutes." After five minutes were up the boss disrobed. He knocked on the bedroom door. The voice from behind the door in a sweet tone said, "Come in." A twist of the door-knob and the door swung open -- only to find the rest of the office force singing, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU!"

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Unlike A-9, this strangely elliptical variant insists upon the married state of the man and thus, I think, we are meant to understand that he has added adultery to his sinfulness. Therefore, the moral judgement is harsher -- and the laughter is louder. Incidentally, I owe Alan Dundes thanks for sending me the copy of A-10.

#### A-11

(Coming from what Dundes calls the "Paperwork Empire," A-11 was in 1969 circulated, printed on one side of a sort of 8x11 broadside, in the University of Kentucky's Medical Center. A copy was presented to me by one of my students in 1971.)

Two men sat at the Club and one said, "Say, how is that gorgeous secretary of yours?"

"Oh, I had to fire her."

"Fire her? How come?"

"Well, it all started a week ago last Thursday, on my 49th birthday. I was never so depressed."

"What has that got to do with it?"

"Well, I came down for breakfast and my wife never mentioned my birthday. A few minutes later, the kids came down and I was sure they would wish me a Happy Birthday, but not one word. As I say, I was most depressed but when I arrived at the office, my secretary greeted me with 'Happy Birthday' and I was glad someone remembered. At noon time she suggested that it was a beautiful day and that she would like to take me to lunch to a nice intimate place in the country. Well, it was nice and we enjoyed our lunch and a couple of martinis. On the way back, she said it was much too nice a day to return to the office and suggested that I go to her apartment where she would give me another martini. That also appealed to me and after a drink and a cigarette, she asked to be excused while she went into the bedroom to change into something more comfortable. A few minutes later, the bedroom door opened and out came my secretary, my wife and two kids, with a birthday cake, singing, 'Happy Birthday' and there I sat with nothing on by my socks."

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More complicated than A-9 or A-10, A-11 still suggests a moral judgement. The man is clearly the aggressor; he is laughed at not only because he is discovered in an embarrassing situation and nude, but also because he underestimated his wife's memory, overestimated his secretary's pliability, and overestimated his own sexual appeal. He is a high-class schnook or a noodle. And, of course, there is a kind of punishment: the gorgeous secretary undeservedly loses her job; and the boss can no longer enjoy the scenery in his office.

A-12 is one of my real prizes. Gerald Thomas, member of the Romance Languages Department of the Memorial University of Newfoundland, heard of my interest in the Surpriser Surprised and most kindly sent me his variant

of the story.

A-12

(Most probably heard in school from 1957-59 in South Wales, otherwise heard at University College of Wales in 1959-63. Written down in 1970 in Newfoundland.)

Well, there was this businessman, see, and in his office he had a very pretty secretary. One day, it was his birthday, and his wife forgot to wish him "Happy Birthday." All day long he was in his office growing more and more upset at his wife's forgetfulness. By the time evening was approaching, he was quite angry. His secretary had noticed his ill-temper and, being a good secretary, had done everything possible to calm him. Finally he confided in her. "My wife has forgotten my birthday. It's the first time ever!"

"Oh, that's really too bad," says the secretary. "I'll tell you what, why don't you come round to my apartment after work and have a quiet drink before you go home?"

Well, the boss was suddenly struck by the idea that it might be a good thing. He really was angry with his wife. So after work, they went back to her apartment. She poured out drinks for them both and they chatted about this and that. The boss was growing more and more appreciative of his secretary's good looks and pleasant company. Another drink and he was looking at her with more than mere appreciation. So you can imagine his feelings when, with a coy smile, she lowered her eyes and said, "I'm going into the bedroom to get into -- er -- something comfortable."

He couldn't get over his good fortune. His beautiful secretary was making him a birthday present of herself! Without wasting any time he stripped off his clothes and stood in eager anticipation before her bedroom door. His excitement rose to fever pitch when a langorous voice murmured, "You can come in now, darling."

With one jump he opens the door and rushes in, stark naked. His wife, children, secretary and all his staff are standing there with a big sign saying: "Happy Birthday to You."

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Worth recording here is some of Professor Thomas' comment on this variant. "The joke obviously made a considerable impression on me since I have kept it in my own repertoire ever since. I think it must be the absurdity of the final situation, coupled with the relief that it was not me in that situation which I found so amusing...probably...addressed to a mixed audience. ...if I told the joke as a student to make friends, I would probably have included some more scabrous detail about the man's physical state before going into the bedroom.

"I...don't tell the joke for the same reasons now as I used to. As a schoolboy, the emphasis was more blatantly on the sexual encounter, where-

as now it probably lies on the incongruity of the final act."

But the real prize was given to me by Mrs. Berniece T. Hiser, "itinerant Appalachian," as she bills herself.

### A-13

(Collected by and written down by Mrs. Hiser on her first teaching job in August, 1927, in Perry County, Kentucky. The footnote is also Mrs. Hiser's, as is the phonetic spelling.)

Well, sir, I allus knowed that Sile is a hot old piece of stuff. I could a treaded her these last ten years any time I chose, but I didn't choose. Not but what old Sile is good-looking, and so fat rain water wouldn't run offen her back, but she is too old for me. And, besides, I wouldn't cuckoll\* old Sibbo, for me and him was raised together like two in a bed.

Other fellers weren't so particular though. They was one of these here fellers at works on the road gang a buildin' the highway up Troublesome from Jackson and fur parts to Hazard seed old Sile and fell fur her the wust way, but he coultn't or hatn't made it to first base with here. But one night old Sibbo went, as he said, to take the night with his kin in the Betty Fork of Troublesome in Knott County. Hearing of this, this ferrin feller rid up and lit at Sile's door.

Fell out hit was Sile's birthday and she felt like giving herself a treat, although she kep him on tenters, wouldn't tell him for God shore. But she did send the young uns off to their Granny Combs's, and bid the ferrin feller sit in the front room before the fire while she cooked their supper in the other room.

She put on taters to fry and heared the feller a-singin' "Dig a hole in the meader." This put old Sile in the mind of things so she set the taters on the back of the stove so they wouldn't burn, and took off all of her clothes, and went into the big house where he sot in front of the fire, and her naket as a bird's eye.

Now, old Sibbo had heared of these here quare women on Troublesome a-givin' surprise birthday parties, so he'd got one up for his womarn, asked in all her neighbors and her Pap and Mom and other relates; and just as Sile come into the front room naket from the kitchen house and the ferriner leaped to his feet and run to meet her, Sibbo and the company come in the front door a-hollerin', "Surprise! Surprise!"

That's why old Sibbo is divorcin' Sile. And that's the God's truth; and a man can't blame him, neither.

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\*"Cuckoll" is a verb in the Kentucky Mountains, past tense "cuckolled," even though a smart alec ferriner says "cuckold" is never used in East Kentucky. In my fifty-five years there, I never heard "cuckold" used as a noun.

I think this is a marvelous form of Version A. It is so fabliau-like that one expects to find it indexed at least in Thompson's Motif-Index and in Baughman's great work The Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America, but I fail to find it in either work. Although there is clearly explicit disapproval of adultery, a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards sex as fun, and an indubitable identification of Sile as the instigator, Sibb comes through as a fairly pallid character, and one cannot avoid the impression that, if it hadn't been for those newfangled ideas about surprise parties, Sile wouldn't have had the opportunity to cuckold her husband, and just everybody would have been happier all-around. In other words, Sibb brought it on himself by being unnecessarily pretentious.

A-13 has all the characteristics of the A version: the narrator's attitude, however perfunctory, shows disapproval of adultery and of Sile's willingness and suggests at least a sympathy for Sibb. The occasion is Sile's birthday. The aftermath is tragic (divorce was shameful in the mountains in the '20's).

Although mountain houseplans don't allow the Freudian symbol of the descent of the staircase into the dark, the narrative almost spells out a Freudian symbolism for "Dig a hole in the meader," and perhaps something could be made of the preparation of a meal on the stove being interrupted by disrobing. The preacher is not present at the exposure scene, but the presence of "Pap and Mom" would be almost as shocking.

There are two more or less aberrant forms of the A Version.

#### A-14

(Collected in Texas in 1961.)

A woman in Austin had been complaining of late to her husband that she had not been getting enough attention. On her birthday the husband came home early to make up for his inattentiveness, undressed, and began wandering from room to room of their well-built, rambling, ranch-style house. He opened the door to the living room to find his wife and her bridge club playing cards. The shock of the experience caused him to have a nervous breakdown from which he never recovered. He is said to be in the Austin State Hospital for the Insane in the psychopathic ward, his hair white, an old man.

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This peculiar, emphasis-less story may imply a bit of fault to both the wife for her sexual appetite and to the husband for his desire to prove his manhood, but I rather think it approves of sex and disapproves of bridge clubs that cause disaster. Certainly, there is sympathy for the male and his insanity is understood to be a tragic aftermath. The Freudian symbolism has changed to seeking from room to room and opening closed doors. Again, the occasion is a birthday. And here the man is directly the instigator of the sexual action, although indirectly the woman with her complaining may be considered the instigator.

Further from the norm is:

A-15

(Collected in 1970 in Kentucky.)

There was this Baptist couple who were real important people in the church. It was the woman's birthday and her husband had planned a surprise birthday party for her. While she was upstairs taking her shower that night, the minister and the rest of the church people were led in by the husband and hidden behind chairs in the living room. His wife, upon finishing her shower, walked down the stairs and stood naked at the bottom and hollered to her husband, "Come and get it while it's clean!"

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Brief as this joke is, there can be no doubt of its belonging to Version A. Peculiarly anti-clerical, this variant has the couple as important in the church, has the minister present along with the "rest of the church people," and may be implying that the church is responsible for the shame or horror in the situation described. Again, there is the Freudian staircase, the birthday as the occasion, and the woman as instigator. Interestingly, it would be possible to build a case for close basic similarities between this A-15 and the fabliau form A-13.

The B version, the Flatulent form, exists for me in only a few variants. The essential difference between A and B is that in the latter the cause of embarrassment (the surprise for the surprisers) is the breaking of wind rather than an appearance in the buff. Other difference will be pointed out in the discussion of the several variants.

It is tempting to suggest bowlerization as a cause for the difference, but it is of course conceivable that a separate tale about surprises existed and picked up some elements from our legend. It is conceivable but I doubt it.

B-1

(Written down from memory in March, 1972, in Kentucky by a girl student who had heard it about six months earlier.)

One night a girl had a special blind date with a guy that she really wanted to impress. He was really nice looking and had a real friendly nature. He and the girl sat in her living room with her parents for a while talking and having a real enjoyable time before they were to go out on their date. After a half hour or so, he stood up and made moves to leave, shook the father's hand and helped the girl with her coat. As they went down the girl's front porch steps -- now in the dark -- he told her that he really liked her family and that he thought she looked real pretty. The girl got a little embarrassed, partly because she was glad that he'd said that and partly because she felt a little gas building up. He walked her to his stationwagon, opened the door on the passenger side for her to get in, closed it and walked around the back to his side. The girl, noticing his position outside the car, promptly relieved herself and gave him a big smile a few seconds later

when he opened the door. He got in, fooled to get the key in and started it, adjust the rear view mirror, and turned to the girl, saying that he was sorry, but he'd forgotten to introduce her to the couples in the backseat.

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Although the "couples in the backseat" are hardly surprisers, they are certainly surprised. I am told that in some variants the occupants of the backseat are the boy's parents to whom he is intending to introduce his girl friend. The courship theme might be considered a parallel to the engagement of recent wedding theme in so many of the A and C variants. Although the horror of the anxious girl is not mentioned, it is certainly implied and thus might be held to be a tragic aftermath. Of course there is no anniversary theme and the scene has been shifted from the inside of a house to the inside of a car -- perhaps a sign of modernization.

The next variant was supplied by a colleague who had heard me read an A variant.

## B-2

(Written down March, 1972, in Kentucky from the memory of having heard a ten-year-old boy tell it in Detroit, Michigan, in about 1935 "as a true story.")

There was a man who was extremely fond of baked beans. He ate them at every opportunity, but he had one great difficulty: whenever he ate baked beans, he had great problems with gas. The older he became, the greater the amount of gas.

He finally realized that he would have to give up his favorite food if he wanted to keep his friends. And so he went for several years without eating beans. Eventually, he married a young and beautiful girl. She was very fond of baked beans, too, and when she offered to fix some for dinner, he asked her not to. He told her his problem and although she didn't appear to believe him, she agreed not to fix the beans.

The had been married only a few months when his birthday arrived. As he left the house that morning, his wife told him to be sure to get home from the office early as she was planning a special treat for him.

That day at lunch, baked beans were on the menu, and he almost weakened, but remembering his old problem, he did not. That evening, he arrived home promptly and started for the kitchen to see what his wife was preparing. She shooed him out before he could see and told him to stay in the dining room.

After a while, she came in carrying a large, covered casserole. She placed it on the table and with a warning to him not to peek, she returned to the kitchen. His curiosity became too great to bear, and he opened the casserole. Beans! Beautiful, baked beans! He couldn't stand it another minute. Looking around to be sure that his wife could not see him, he picked

up a spoon and helped himself to a large mouthful of beans. They were delicious! But all of a sudden, the old feeling of gas came back upon him. Somehow, he had to expel the gas without letting his wife realize that he had been sampling. Looking around, he saw the window -- and he opened it, turned his back to the outdoors, and relieved himself of the gas. He closed the window and walked back into the center of the room, looking very innocent.

But the beans were too tempting. Again he sampled the beans, and again he had to go to the window. And a third time, the same. Just as he was wondering whether to try the beans again, his wife came into the dining room. She lit the candles on the table. As he prepared to seat her at the table, he heard a loud, "Surprise!" behind him. He turned around to see his parents, closest friends, and minister issue forth from behind the draperies in the dining room. He fainted.

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The Pandora's box motif ("don't peek") is unique to this variant of the legend. Otherwise, it shares with the other B variants the motif of unsuccessfully concealed embarrassment (the flatulence). And it shares with the overall legend mentions of the wedding and of the office and, much more significant, the themes of the good intentions of the bride-planner of the surprise, of the occasion being a birthday, of the surprisers' being surprised, of the minister's presence, and of the young man's fainting in embarrassment.

The next variant was also inspired by my reading. I read A-1 in a folklore class and one of the students wrote down her memory of a story told by her husband. Very interestingly, she was embarrassed to tell me the tale and admitted she thought it "dirtier" than A-1.

### B-3

(Written down in Kentucky in 1971 from the memory of an earlier narration in Kentucky.)

There's the story of the birthday man who suffers acute gastric distress following a big meal of beans.

Told to sit alone in a darkened room awaiting a birthday surprise, he takes the opportunity to give vent to a long series of raucous explosions. Then, of course, the light is switched on suddenly, and twenty people begin to sing, "Happy Birthday."

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The last B variant is a literary recording of the legend, which was pointed out to me by a colleague.

### B-4

(From Carson McCullers, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Bantam Books, 1970, p. 202. The novel was originally published in 1940 by Houghton-Mifflin

Company.) (Biff Brannon has been reviewing his life and remembers his twenty-ninth birthday when his sister-in-law Lucile had invited him to drop by her apartment.)

He expected from this some small remembrance -- a plate of cherry tarts or a good shirt. She met him at the door and blindfolded his eyes before he entered. Then she said she would be back in a second. In the silent room he listened to her footsteps and when she had reached the kitchen he broke wind. He stood in the room...blindfolded and pooted. Then all at once he knew with horror he was not alone.... At that minute Lucile came back and undid his eyes....the room was full of people....He wanted to crawl up the wall....

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Again there are the birthday, the well-intentioned surprise party that misfires, and the unsuccessful concealment of embarrassment. There is also a kind of sorry aftermath: when he discovers he can't crawl up the wall, the embarrassed Biff drinks a quart of whisky. Even the word apartment rings an echo from various other variants. It is interesting to conjecture whether there is any influence between B-4 and B-3. Beans, which of course are peculiar to the B variants, are not mentioned in B-4 and neither is the singing, or shouting, of "Happy Birthday," but the image of the unhappy victim is strikingly similar in the two variants.

Version C tells a story very like that generally implied in Version A: a young couple (always a couple, rather than one of the two) is unintentionally (usually) exposed naked at the beginning of a surprise party and frequently there is a sad aftermath. The Surprisers in the C-variants are less conspicuous than those in the A-variants, but nevertheless they are surprised. The focus is more on the victims in the C-variants and a part, at least, of their activity is invariably baby-sitting. The time span of the C-variants is exactly ten years -- one-quarter that of the A- and B-variants -- and it is perhaps because of this that more homogeneity exists among the C-variants than among the others. Possibly, of course, the C-version was once an independent story and has received influence from the older(?) tale that is the A-version. But it is my conviction that C is merely a timely modernization of A. If it is not, the number of persistent details common to both versions is phenomenal.

Regard:

C-1

(Heard in 1961 in Kentucky and recorded a year later.)

A young couple, whose wedding was in the near future, were asked to sit with the boy's brother's children one evening. They agreed to keep the children. After bathing and feeding their charges, the couple put them to bed. After watching television for awhile, the boy and girl began petting. They decided to ~~make~~ make the most of their opportunity. They both undressed and got into bed, not expecting the parents until much later. Before very long, the telephone rang. The boy got out of bed and answered it. It was his brother, telling him to check the furnace in the basement. The brother had forgotten to add enough

coal.

The boy and girl decided to go downstairs together. They got a flashlight and started toward the door. Neither had bothered to dress because they were alone in the house. They opened the basement door and started down the steps. They were giggling with excitement and half-embarrassment. When they reached the bottom of the steps, the basement lights flashed on and there was a shout -- "Congratulations!" The families of the couple had thrown a surprise shower!

The girl, completely horrified, fainted and the boy dashed up the steps.

If there was any more ending to the tale I don't remember it. Also, I'm hazy about the reason the brother asked them to go to the basement. I think it was to check the furnace.

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The narrator's feeling that there should be more to the ending may reflect a forgotten tragic detail. Otherwise, the variant is typical: sympathy for the couple, implicit disdain for a society that makes sex shameful, the Freudian descent into the dark (again emphasized by descriptive detail -- giggling, excitement, embarrassment), and a suggestion that good intentions have gone astray.

The next variant, fragmentary (I think), puts a very heavy emphasis upon sympathy for the couple and an implicit justification for their incontinence. Note again that the background is one of baby-sitting.

C-2

(Collected in Kentucky in 1970.)

Once there was a couple in our town who had been going with each other for a few years, but they had decided they weren't going to get married until the guy had finished college. Well, it so happened that this one weekend when he was home to surprise her, that she had promised a neighbor she would baby-sit for them while they went to a movie. Being the nice guy that he was, he told her that he would sit with her while the neighbors were out. As the evening went by, the children were sent to bed, and the couple sat on the couch making up for all the time he had been gone. Well, it got to the point that they decided -- why wait? -- they were going to be married in a few weeks anyway. Well, just as they had undressed, in pops the neighbors with a whole gang of people with a big surprise party they had planned for the couple-to-be.

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This is a peculiarly unbalanced variant. It is as though the introduction were given in full and the rest of the tale had collapsed. The only detail that points to narrative skill is the anticipation of surprise in the boy's reason for coming home from college. Certainly, the Freudian symbolism and the denouement have disappeared completely.

More complete, even though it shows signs of haste, is:

C-3

(Heard in 1962 in Kentucky.)

A couple that had been going together for quite a while were baby-sitting one night. While sitting on the couch, the situation became quite involved and one thing led to another. Suddenly the telephone rang. It was the father of the children with whom they were baby-sitting. He asked the couple to go down to the basement and turn the furnace up. The boy picked up his girl friend and carried her downstairs in his arms. Both were naked. As they reached the bottom of the stairs the light was switched on and their friends yelled, "Surprise!" It was the girl's birthday.

This is told as actually having happened. The girl is supposedly in a mental institution as a result of the shock and humiliation.

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This story is so skeletal that it is hard to determine the narrator's attitude. Perhaps the first sentence suggests a sympathy for the couple that is reiterated in the last sentence -- a pattern that Axel Olrik would have hailed. The Freudian symbolism is, however, quite complete.

Differing only in insignificant detail from C-3 is:

C-4

(Collected in 1961 in Kentucky.)

An engaged couple were baby-sitting. It was only a few weeks before they were to be married; so they decided "What the hell, why wait? Just two weeks." They both undressed. A little while later the phone rang. It was their friend for whom they were baby-sitting. She said she had left her washer on in the basement, and would they go down and turn it off? Since they just had to go to the basement they decided there wasn't any point in getting dressed, so they went down together. Just as they were feeling their way down the stairs, the lights went on and the people yelled "Surprise!"

As a result the girl went crazy and left town.

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The peculiar double disposal of the female victim may spring from a faulty memory of "The girl went crazy and the boy left town."

C-5 is particularly graphic in the passage which incorporates the Freudian symbolism that seems to have stuck so firmly in so many informants' memories.

C-5

(Collected in 1961 in Kentucky.)

A young girl, who was engaged to be married, was asked to baby-sit with her young cousin. She agreed to do so, and invited her fiancé to sit with her. During the course of the evening they became passionately inclined, took off their clothes, and frolicked about the house. While giggling and pushing one another around, the boy heaved the girl on his back in piggyback style and bounced her through the rooms. Going past the door to the basement, they heard a sound, and the boy teasingly said he was going to take her down in the basement with the spooks. He gropingly took her down the stairs in the dark. When they reached the bottom, a light came on and the girl's parents, the minister, and many prominent people of the community jumped out from their hiding places and yelled, "Surprise!" They had arranged a surprise bridal shower for the couple. The boy dropped the girl from his back, ran up the stairs, grabbed his clothes, and fled from the city. It was later learned that he had joined the Navy, and never again contacted the girl. The girl lost her mind, and was committed to an asylum.

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Here once more we have the strange recurring detail of the ministerial presence, that somehow makes the horror the greater, and that can only imply a latent anticlericalism and a latent sympathy for those who yield to the temptations of premarital sex. Indeed, I suppose the anticlericalism entails condemnation of those forces which made me use temptation instead of attraction or summons in the preceding sentence!

Very similar to C-5 except that it does not dwell upon the tragic results of the double-surprise is:

C-6

(Collected in 1970 in Kentucky.)

This story was told to me by my roommate last summer (1970). He heard it from a person he had known when he lived in the dorm during the previous spring semester here at UK [the University of Kentucky]. The incident happened to some friends of this person in Northern Kentucky, where he was from. It is supposedly true.

This couple was engaged to be married. They were at the home of her parents. The parents were going out somewhere that evening and the young lady was supposed to baby-sit for her young brother, who was already asleep. She was also instructed by her mother to take the laundry down to the basement and put it in the washer.

After the parents had left, the young couple began to entertain themselves, engaging in the age-old custom of petting. After a while and a moderate amount of coaxing and persuading, the young man convinced his wife-to-be that since they would

soon be married and no one would know the difference anyway, there would be nothing wrong with making love.

They went upstairs to her bedroom, took off their clothes, and got in bed. At this point she remembered the laundry her mother had told her to put in the washer. She insisted that she had to do it because her mother would want to know why it wasn't done if she failed to do it.

The young man helped her carry the laundry basket down the stairs. Both were still unclothed. As they approached the bottom of the basement stairs the lights went on and they heard someone yell "Surprise!"

Their pastor, their mother and father, and their church youth group were giving the couple a surprise engagement party.

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Again, the Freudian symbol is present, though made little of; but because of its position both close to the end of the story and yet first in a series, the ministerial presence is given extraordinary, if unknowing, significance and again must indicate anticlericalism.

The next aberrant variant had strange and ambivalent attitudes that may spring from two facts: 1. it was collected from a non-Mormon Utah native; 2. the informant, at the age of retirement, struggles valiantly to empathize with the young "in" generation.

C-7

(Collected in 1970 in Kentucky.)

In a small town in Utah, the story goes, the daughter of a Mormon minister volunteered to baby-sit her younger sister while her parents attended a church celebration.

Although members of this faith are very strict about misusing their bodies, this teenage girl did not seem to maintain the beliefs which were taught to her by her parents.

After her parents left their home, the girl decided to indulge in a few of the habits which her parents disapproved of strongly. She smoked numerous cigarettes, drank several beers and invited her boy friend over to entertain her while her parents were gone.

The girl became quite drunk and forgot all about her baby-sitting chores, but she did remember her boy friend. Around 10:30 P.M. she decided to go to bed, accompanied by her boy friend.

Her parents came home about 11 P.M. and found their daughter in bed with her boy friend. Although the couple had done nothing morally wrong, the family became extremely humiliated and consequently, left town within twenty-four hours.

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This rather startling variant does, I think, belong to Version C: the baby-sitting, the unconcealed anticlericalism, and the sympathy for the revolt against the Establishment, all bespeak relationship to the C Version of the Surpriser Surprised. I suppose the shame and the disappearance of the family are deteriorated remains of what usually appears as a tragic ending for the girl and the boy.

The seven preceding variants of C all, I assert, belong to young audiences: baby-sitting, sympathy with passion, anti-Establishment implications, anticlericalism, bitterness with postponement of living an adult life, tacit approval of premarital sex, complaint about bad luck in the way of life -- all are part of the existence of youth.

The last two variants belong to a very different audience, an audience that employs baby-sitters, that is suspicious of youth, that has no sympathy with excuses for premarital sex, that hesitates to trust its babies to the care of "irresponsible" youth.

#### C-8

(Collected in Kentucky in 1970 from an informant who had learned it while with the U.S. Army overseas.)

Once upon a time, I knew of a baby-sitter who got caught red-handed. This young chick was a baby-sitter in order to earn a little money so she could go to school. She worked week-nights and every weekend. One Saturday night she was baby-sitting and thought that it would be a good idea to invite her boy friend over to spend the evening with her. She gave him a buzz on the telephone and asked him to come over.

The young lover wasn't very long in getting there. She told him to make himself at home. He went straight to the icebox. He got himself a small snack and returned to watch some television. Well, he and the chick were watching the television and one thing led to another. They decided to make love because they were going to be married next week and besides, this wasn't something new to them. They took each other's clothes off and started to get with it when the telephone rang. It was the woman who was having the young girl to baby-sit for her. She said that she had left the heater off in the basement and was afraid that her pipes would freeze up. So the young chick said that she would go downstairs and turn it on. The young man said that he would go with her to keep her warm. So off they went. When they got to the top of the basement stairs, they turned on the light. Surprise!! There was the preacher, the doctor, her parents, his parents, and a bunch of friends. They had all come to give the young couple a surprise bridal shower because they were so nice. The young chick went insane and the young lover left town and was never heard of again.

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C-8 gives a unique twist to some of the persistent details common to the variants of the Surpriser Surprised. Although the couple is long engaged, the narrator's attitude sours as he remarks sardonically on their sexual

experience and upon their being "so nice." The Freudian symbol is twisted into the bad dream in which the nude couple are framed in the light at the top of the stairway looking down at a sea of shocked faces. The ministerial presence merely reinforces the righteous moral disapproval explicit in the idiom "caught red-handed." And the tragic ending, seemingly anticlimactic, may be just retribution rather than tragedy.

C-9 is kin to C-8 in its rectitude, but has lost the element of the double surprise. In C-9 the surprise is a trap and the surprisers have their suspicions fulfilled. Again, it is obviously a story for the older generation and like C-8 it leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

### C-9

(Collected in 1961 in Kentucky.)

One night a girl was baby-sitting, and she called her boy friend to come over. When he arrived, they went to the bedroom upstairs and undressed. Suddenly, the girl remembered that the woman had told her to put the clothes out of the washing machine and into the dryer. So, she told her boy friend that she would have to go to the basement and take care of the clothes. He insisted on going with her because it was dark. So she told him he could. As they started down the basement steps, he picked her up and carried her because the step at the bottom was loose and the girl might fall. When they reached the bottom step, she reached up and turned on the light and suddenly they heard, "Surprise!" They looked around, and there were all the friends of the people who lived in that house. They had planned this to see if their suspicions of the babysitter were true.

This was supposed to have actually happened in Mayfield, Kentucky.

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We can hope that this malicious little narrative is a badly decayed form of the Surpriser Surprised. It could, of course, be an early version of an independent story that got sucked into the pattern of the longer-established, more common tale that I have designated Version A. But the dalliant baby-sitter, the naked descent of the couple to the basement (this time down two flights of stairs), the shout of "Surprise," all belong to the Surpriser Surprised, and without these details there wouldn't be much to C-9; therefore, I choose to think of C-9 as a distant form of the same tale that gives us variants C-1 through C-8.

In summary, we have twenty-eight variants (six of them quite noticeably divergent) that divide into three versions: A, with fifteen variants; B, with four variants; and C, with nine. Statistically, the twenty-eight texts have the following features as narratives:

In most of them, more than one attitude is implied on the part of the narrator. Perhaps surprisingly, thirteen of the texts imply an approval of sex as fun; ten texts suggest a sympathy for the flagrant couple because their marriage has been postponed. Ten narratives express dismay at the unhappy outcome of the good intentions with which the surprise

party had been planned. Five variants imply or express discontent with puritanical standards that hold nakedness or sex as lewdness. However, six express condemnation of the unbridled passion of one or both members of the exposed couple. Five imply that the defeat of good intentions is one of the "ways of the world" -- c'est la vie. Three give warnings about the irresponsibilities of baby-sitters. One expresses sympathy with the point of view that loneliness is ample justification for an invitation to illicit sex, and another one sympathizes with the awkward shyness of a newly-wed couple vis-à-vis each other.

The occasion for the party essential to the tale is in fifteen instances a birthday (eight times the girl's; seven times the man's); in nine accounts (in one of them it is also the girl's birthday) it is a pre-wedding "show-er"; in two instances it is a housewarming; in one, a trap for feckless baby-sitters; in one, a blind date; and in one it is not specified.

The aftermath when specified -- in eleven texts, it is not specified -- is tragic in varying degrees. In seven instances, the girl goes insane; in one, she faints; in one, her family disappears; in one, her engagement is broken; in another, she loses her husband via divorce; in one, she loses her job. In four instances, the male disappears, joins the navy, runs away; in one, he becomes insane; in another, he becomes drunk; and, in another, he faints.

Frequently, the narrative is quite explicit about the instigator of the sexual play which leads to the embarrassing exposure of the naked person or the naked couple. Although in nine instances the narrative is not explicit on this point, in eight instances the girl is clearly the aggressor, and in seven the instigator is the male. In the B version, of course, this determination does not apply.

And, finally, there were the persistent minor details. The intriguing descent of a staircase down into darkness occurs in fifteen of the variants, and in five there is the motif in which the naked lover carries or "piggy-backs" his naked sweetheart to the unexpected exposure. And in seven of the variants, a preacher is specified as one of those present. In all but two of these instances, the ministerial presence is a kind of key to an anticlericalism in the variant.

The Surpriser Surprised has been checked against the Thompson Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, the Baughman Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America, the Christiansen Migratory Legends, and the Dorson Folk Legends of Japan. To the best of my knowledge it does not appear in any of these.

I should like, in closing, to propose as possible motifs for the A and C versions of the Surpriser Surprised:

F 1041.8.15\* Madness from exposure while naked.

N 384.0.1.4\* Madness from embarrassment.

Q 241.5\* Adultery (or pre-marital sexual intercourse) revealed accidentally during good-intentioned surprise.

Q 495.4\* or Q 589.6\* Naked appearance before friends as  
punishment for dalliance.

U 190.\* The frustration of good intentions.

Z560\* Good intentions have evil results.

Last, and most important of all, let me thank most profusely those who supplied the basic materials upon which this meditation has been based: my colleagues past, David Thomas, and present, Mrs. Kathleen A. Smith and Herbert Billiland; my folklorist peers Mrs. Berniece T. Hiser, Alan Dundes, and Gerald Thomas; and my informants and former students of the last ten years whose names are arranged in alphabetical order: Helen Graham Baughman, Carol Beesley, Billie K. Broadus, Dora June Burgess, Robert B. Eidson, Nancy Gilpin, Don Graham, Susanna Hall, Mary Ann Harris, Ovida R. Head, Linda Hoffman, Sue Illman, Ann Kennedy, Jeannie Leedom, Dorothy Mason, Mary Ann Moody, Corley Revell, Carmen Rodriguez, Thomas N. Sanders, Susan Vessels, Sharon Walter, and Betty Jo Webb. Without them, there could have been no paper.