



A PERILOUS PRELUDE

While two hundred music lovers were boarding a fog-enveloped train to attend the concert of the Westfield Musical Society, at Plainfield, a shrill whistle blew and a faint red glow appeared above the tracks to the east. It was the Cannon Ball speeding westward in the path of the concert special which was twenty minutes late. To J. Hervey Townley, on the stoop of his store, near the Central Avenue crossing, it seemed that the standing train and the passengers swarming into it were doomed. "I heard the Cannon Ball thunder over the crossing, the engine puffing furiously on the reverse and the cars jolting against each other. I held my breath, expecting a crash."

But there was no crash—"Call it luck, call it God, call it what you will—but also call it Frank R. Pennington," says the Standard Editor.

It was, indeed, the quick action of the local station agent that spared this town the worst tragedy in its history. Pennington saw Flagman Pierce McCormick frantically waving his red lantern, saw the ominous light of the approaching locomotive and shouted to the engineer of the concert train—"Get going—quick!" As he helped the last bewildered passenger on board the train pulled out. A few seconds later the Cannon Ball came rolling in, its engine snorting like an angry bull under leash. Engineer Nick Sheridan had "plugged" it. When, at last, it came to a stop, he jumped from the cab and shouted—"My God, Frank, that was a close one!"

When interviewed, Agent Pennington said: "A railroad man is supposed to be there when the time comes. That's why Pierce McCormick took in the situation and signalled; that's why Nick Sheridan plugged his engine; that's why I hustled the passenger train out of the way. The best block system a railroad can have is a block system of men."

"An Artistic Triumph"

The concert—the second of the winter season—was held in the Casino, Plainfield, because the Board of Managers of the Westfield Musical Society were unable to secure a suitable place in town. Their judgment was sustained by an audience of over 500 persons. The critics described the concert as an artistic triumph. The chorus, "reinforced by a large delegation" from the Amphion Orchestra of Brooklyn, and the soloists, Mrs. Anna Mooney-Burch, soprano; and William J. Levin, tenor, were of Metropolitan calibre. "Miss Carrie H. Beebe, the accompanist, was undoubtedly an important factor; her stroke was prompt, precise and magnetic, inspired every voice and every instrument." And Prof. C. Mortimer Wiske was acclaimed "one of the best, if not, indeed, the very best, musical director in America!" The male chorus' "A Father's Lullaby" was encored many times, and the Professor recalled "in recognition of his authorship."

"Music," observed Clarinetist Charles Day, as he tumbled into bed, "hath charms and terrors, too." February 16, 1891.

