



DANGER, MR. PRESIDENT!

by *Larry G. Newman*

It was dusk and the February air was chill. At a remote railroad crossing near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, a carriage drew up. Three men quickly got out and hurried to a railroad coach and engine standing by. Then

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another man, tall and lean, moved slowly from the carriage. He drew a soft felt hat from his pocket and put it on. Even though it was cold, he wore no cloak, shawl, or overcoat. He went straight to the coach and at once the mysterious train was on its way.

The train streaked through the early evening. Although it was dark, the lamps inside the coach were not lighted. Nothing unusual happened in the remaining four or so hours ride. There was only one stop. At a village called Downingtown, the engineer halted for water. Three of the men alighted for a bite of food. The fourth man remained alone inside the darkened coach. He drank a cup of tea and munched a dry roll.

As that train rushed silently onward, elsewhere three men were engaged in a related mission. They had started shortly before dark that evening. One of them had climbed a telegraph pole two miles outside Harrisburg. He had made several cuts in the wires—enough to prevent any messages from going out of Harrisburg. Then he and his two companions quietly returned to the town. There they tested their work. They asked the telegraph operator to send a message to Baltimore. The operator replied that he could not. All communications with that city had been cut.

Why this cutting of wires? Why the darkened train streaking through the night with its mysterious fourth occupant?

That fourth man was the key figure in the strange drama. He was Abraham Lincoln, President-elect of the strife-torn United States. Lincoln was on his way to Washington. All these secret activities were taking place because

a plot to assassinate him was discovered.

The plot called for blowing up the railroad bridges and ferryboat crossings ahead of Lincoln's special train. If these attempts on Lincoln's life failed, still other plans were laid to murder him before he could be sworn into office. It was of course essential for them to keep in touch with one another. Hence the silencing of the telegraph.

The plot had been found out by Allan Pinkerton, the famed detective. Early in 1861 his agency had been keeping an eye on certain groups of secessionists. In so doing, the agents had learned quite by chance that groups of prominent Maryland men had sworn to kill Lincoln. Checking proved beyond doubt that the plot was well thought out. What's more, it would probably succeed—unless Lincoln followed Pinkerton's advice. And that was a real problem. All kinds of security measures were distasteful to the future President.

Pinkerton met Lincoln less than thirty hours before the plot was to unfold. He advised him that the only wise thing to do was to enter Washington secretly. Lincoln knew he would be ridiculed as a coward for "sneaking" into the city. Finally, however, he agreed. But first he insisted on keeping two other engagements. On the very day of the plot he raised the flag at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. He then went on to Harrisburg by train to appear before the Pennsylvania legislature. Only then was he willing to take part in the counterplan.

There were great crowds in Harrisburg, and so Lincoln was able to slip away unnoticed from a reception. He got to the secret

train at the crossing without being detected. There he took off his familiar top hat. He wore instead the soft felt hat that he carried in his pocket. Later, to replace the shawl he ordinarily wore, he borrowed an overcoat from one of his three traveling companions.

The darkened train reached the Philadelphia station early. Lincoln had to take a carriage to the station from which the regular Baltimore-Washington train departed. Pinkerton himself rode in that carriage. He told the driver to go slowly, by a twisting route, and to act as though he were on the lookout for a fare.

All went as planned. The train was just filling up for the night's journey. The President-elect, still wearing the borrowed over-

coat and the soft felt hat, entered a sleeping car. Not one passenger looked his way.

Nearly five hours had passed since any word had been released of Lincoln's whereabouts. At least seven more hours were to pass before even his family knew of his safety. The train from Philadelphia sped through the night. It was safely ferried across the Susquehanna River, and crossed bridges without incident. It arrived safely in Washington while the assassins still waited in vain for news of its movements.

On April 14, 1865, an assassin finally succeeded in slaying the President. But Allan Pinkerton and a handful of dedicated men had saved Lincoln to shepherd the nation through its most trying years.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. As Lincoln entered the train, he wore a
 - A shawl
 - B soft hat
 - C hood
2. He was accompanied by
 - A two men
 - B three men
 - C four men
3. At the village of Downington, the train
 - A took on another passenger
 - B crashed through a barricade
 - C stopped for a few minutes
4. The three men from Harrisburg tried to send a telegraph message in order to
 - A make sure all the wires were cut
 - B warn the plotters in Baltimore
 - C draw suspicion away from themselves
5. At the time of this story, Lincoln had not been
 - A asked to run for President
 - B elected as President
 - C sworn in as President
6. The plot to assassinate Lincoln had been discovered by a
 - A detective
 - B newspaperman
 - C congressman
7. Pinkerton advised Lincoln to
 - A delay his trip to Washington
 - B enter Washington secretly
 - C have troops meet him in Washington
8. Lincoln traveled across Philadelphia by
 - A foot
 - B horseback
 - C carriage
9. The safe completion of the journey was due mainly to its remarkable
 - A speed
 - B secrecy
 - C route
10. Pinkerton and his men were successful in
 - A prolonging Lincoln's life
 - B preventing Lincoln's murder
 - C predicting Lincoln's death