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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE

The survey of the Des Moines River below the Raccoon Fork during the summer of 1841 "was a health-giving excursion," wrote John C. Frémont in his *Memoirs*, "but it did not cure the special complaint for which I had been sent there." No one would suspect from reading his report that he was afflicted with any ailment. With the exception of excursions into the woods, "where deer and wild turkey were abundant", he attended to duty assiduously, executing his commission with thoroughness and dispatch. Why, then, had he been "loath to go" exploring, he who was to win the epithet of "Pathfinder"?

The ostensible purpose of Frémont's reconnaissance of the lower course of the Des Moines River was to complete the survey of the region between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, in which he had assisted J. N. Nicollet in 1838 and 1839. The earlier explorations had embraced only the upper part of some of the principal tributaries and, as work on Nicollet's large topographical map progressed, there was need of ascertaining exact geographical data pertaining to the lower portions of these streams. Frémont, because of his connection with the enter-

prise from the beginning, was deemed to be well qualified to obtain the desired information. The command of this expedition was indeed an opportunity to demonstrate his ability. Prominent statesmen in Washington, like Senator Thomas H. Benton, were even then planning more extensive explorations in the far west which would require the most capable leadership.

Officially the youthful geographer was sent to Iowa on government business; but actually more dynamic purposes caused his sudden departure to the western frontier. "The influence of women", according to Frémont, "is a force sometimes dangerous." He was thinking of Mrs. Benton, for it was she who contrived to have him dispatched on exploration duty. He went reluctantly because he had fallen in love with Jessie Benton — comely, vivacious, intelligent, and just sixteen — who was equally attracted by the energy and demeanor of "the handsomest young man who ever walked the streets of Washington".

As the visits of the ardent lieutenant to the hospitable Benton drawing-room became more and more frequent, the courtship developed apace. The Senator and Mrs. Benton became alarmed. Not that they objected to the irreproachable young officer, for they liked and admired him; but Frémont was poor, army life was unsettled at best, and his prospects then offered little encouragement. Besides, Jessie was too young to think of marriage.

In spite of a parental ultimatum that Jessie and John were not to see each other except on rare occasions, their mutual affection continued to flourish, and early in April, 1841, while others were watching the funeral procession of President Harrison, they plighted their troth. Something decisive had to be done about that. Mrs. Benton consulted her friend Mrs. Poinsett, and she spoke to her husband, the Secretary of War. So Frémont was hustled away to survey a river in Iowa, while Miss Benton was taken south to attend an elegant house party at her grandfather's mansion. The impetuous lovers were to wait a year—in the hope that their ardor would cool.

But neither the diversions of a social excursion nor the lonely duty of exploration served to cure the "special complaint" from which they both suffered. Jessie Benton returned to Washington in July, "impatient to see" her fiancé, and Frémont, the inveterate explorer, hastened back to the capital as soon as he could, probably by September.

"The most important events of our individual life come upon us suddenly", he observed in later years, "and so it was with our marriage." The eager couple were secretly wedded on October 19th by an accommodating Catholic priest. They were not particular about the religious faith of the officiating clergyman if he would perform the ceremony quickly and securely. More than two weeks elapsed before Lieutenant Frémont, embarrassed but deter-

mined, faced his irate father-in-law. Mrs. Frémont was present to lend support if necessary.

“Get out of the house and never cross my door again!” commanded Senator Benton, blazing with anger. “Jessie shall stay here!”

Thereupon Jessie intervened, defiantly and dramatically. She did stay at home, and her husband came to stay with her.

J. E. B.