

Frémont

(Middle/High School version)

by Tom Smith

10-page script sample

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CHARACTERS

- 1 Male, most often playing John C. Frémont
 - 2 Female, most often playing Jessie Benton Frémont
- Recorded Voice(s)

TIME/PLACE

1829-1890

The United States

Author's Note: This piece is split into numerous small units, designated with a *** to indicate a change in time. Please keep the pace brisk: don't treat these changes as full scene changes with music, set shifts, etc. In fact, please keep the set and costume pieces to a minimum.

FRÉMONT

PROLOGUE

A pre-recorded cacophony. Various voices overlap and merge.

RECORDED VOICES

How is such a man possible?

His stories read like fiction!

Did he really find an entire mountain?

Del Norte; he never could forget what happened in those mountains!

Cannibalism!

His poor wife left alone to fend for herself!

The children, without a father around!

He went out and claimed California!

He got us a transcontinental railroad!

He founded the West, the entire West!

He was the greatest explorer of the nineteenth century—

—and he did it all for the sake of—

—the sake of...

—the sake of...

The chair recognizes Senator Crittenden, from Kentucky.

1/CRITTENDEN

Capitalism, gentlemen, is why we founded this country! Our fathers left England to forge a new destiny, free of kings. The only way we're gonna hold our own in the world is to show what a prosperous and thriving nation we have. But we can't do that if we don't find and use the riches of the land! We need to send out parties of men to discover that vast unknown to the West, identify its resources, and raise our economy! We owe it to the world to show that Capitalism equals prosperity! Expand for Capitalism!

RECORDED VOICE

We recognize the Senator from Missouri—Senator Benton.

2/BENTON

Gentlemen, as some of you already know, I am not one for speeches.

Laughter.

But I must tell you that we owe it to our children to provide a better life. Land is there for our taking, gentlemen, and take it we must. It is our manifest destiny. It will not be easy. Lives will be lost trying to claim it. A few men will be sacrificed to explore this continent and make it our own, but so be it! We must put forth a united front to support the expansion of our nation, and reward those brave few who help us claim what is rightfully ours. The future of our great nation is in our hands! To expansionism!

1/CRITTENDEN

To new land!

2/BENTON

And to the poor fools who have to get it for us!

SCENE 1

1

John Charles Frémont.

2

Born in Savannah, Georgia in 1813.

1

1829. Frémont is 16 and in college.

A meadow. FRANK studying, FRÉMONT daydreaming.

2/FRANK

I get forty-four for number seven. What do you get? Charles?

1/FRÉMONT

I'm sorry, what?

2/FRANK

You're distracted again.

1/FRÉMONT

It's nothing. Really.

2/FRANK

So, what did you get for number seven?

1/FRÉMONT

Boston.

2/FRANK

Grabbing Frémont's book.

What are you—you're writing in your journal again! Charles, we agreed I'd help you with your Mathematics today. You persuaded me to come all the way to this meadow to study and then you don't even bring your textbook! I should just let you fail out of school! You don't take it seriously at all.

1/FRÉMONT

Quit yelling at me like you're the Dean.

2/FRANK

Just forget it! I can't be your tutor. I can't stand people like you!

1/FRÉMONT

What are you getting so mad about?

2/FRANK

Look, Charles, college is very important to me. I've worked all my life to be able to afford the tuition. My entire town had bake sales to help send me here. I can't afford to louse up this opportunity. But you... You had some rich lawyer foot your bill—

1/FRÉMONT

—as a gesture of kindness after working my finger to the bone for him for years—

2/FRANK

—you start school as a junior—

1/FRÉMONT

—I made good grades—

2/FRANK

—and you have the nerve to waste my time when I am trying to do you a favor! You're a dreamer, Charles Frémont! You write stories in that journal of yours and stare out the window during class and you have no discipline at all. They're going to kick you out of this place one day, and when they do I want you to remember that the world doesn't take too kindly to dreamers. This country was not founded by poets and artists. It was founded by explorers and politicians; they have a kind of discipline you will never have. I'm going back to the dormitory.

FRANK exits.

1/FRÉMONT

Frank?!? What was all that about?

* * *

Room of the Regents, Charleston College.

2/HEAD OF REAGENTS

John Charles Frémont. It has come to the attention of the Board of Charleston College that you have blatantly neglected your duties to this school. You have kept up your grades, but your attendance record is appalling. You have been given warnings, which you choose to ignore. A boy with talent and intelligence is an asset; a boy who squanders opportunities is a liability. Charleston College cannot afford such a liability. The Board suspends you from this institution indefinitely. I hope you find your path in life. Good day.

SCENE 2

A verandah on the estate of Joel Roberts Poinsett.

2/POINSETT

Sometimes a boy needs a break in life. He makes a mistake, and he needs some guidance. Since you don't have a father, it's important I give you that guidance. And a break or two.

1/FRÉMONT

Mr. Poinsett, how can I ever thank you? You have done so much for me.

2/POINSETT

Charles, I see great potential in you. I also see a boy who has acknowledged his mistakes. That's why I recommended you to teach for the Naval Academy. I knew seeing another part of the world would open your eyes.

1/FRÉMONT

And it did. I thought when I left college it would be the end of me. But my time with the Naval Academy got me back on track. My friends didn't believe me when I told them that I knew you: Joel Roberts Poinsett, Secretary of War under President Van Buren! And me? I'm just a 2nd lieutenant in the Topographical Corps, mapping out small plots of land and swamps. It amazes me you haven't moved past our friendship.

2/POINSETT

True friends are eternal, Charles. They help one another. You see me as a success, and I suppose I am in some ways. The reason I am successful is because I always believed I could be. I took advantage of opportunities and I forged a path into uncharted areas. I want you to do the same. That is the greatest gift you could ever give me, and yourself. Forge your own destiny.

* * *

FRÉMONT writing in his journal.

1/FRÉMONT

Poinsett has opened so many doors for me. Like today, I met Thomas Hart Benton, the Senator from Missouri. I told him I was a topographer. He went on and on about how much he liked the idea of explorers and mapmakers. “The country needs more space,” he declared, “and you boys are just the ones to get it for us.” He’s very passionate when he speaks, and it made me feel like I should rush right out and claim the West for America. He’s invited me to his house next week.

* * *

1/FRÉMONT

Tonight I met Sarah, Senator Benton’s oldest daughter. She’s very beautiful: she made me extremely nervous. She goes to school about 3 miles away and I was asked to escort her to a concert at her school next week. I said I would. We’re meeting her 15-year-old sister Jessie there, so at least it won’t just be the two of us alone together. It’s easier to figure out the elevation of a swamp than it is to figure out what to talk about with a girl when you’re alone together.

* * *

1/FRÉMONT

It’s love at first sight! I know no one who has made me feel so alive. She’s funny and smart and pretty and all the things you’re supposed to be. Jessie made my heart come alive! This is the girl I am destined to marry!

* * *

MRS. BENTON at her desk.

2/MRS. BENTON

Dear Mrs. Poinsett—

As you know, John Frémont, known to us as Charles, is quite smitten with my younger daughter, Jessie. Unfortunately, Charles is much too old and too poor to be a good match for her. Here is where you might be able to help.

I know that your husband has been a life-long friend to Charles. If you could persuade him to send Charles on a lengthy map-making assignment, I am certain the time apart would end this relationship. If you could do this for me, I would be eternally grateful.

Your dearest friend—

Mrs. Thomas Hart Benton

* * *

FRÉMONT reading a letter.

1/FRÉMONT

"...chosen among hundreds to be chief officer on a year-long mission to survey the Des Moines River in Iowa territory. Please prepare to leave at once. Sincerely, Joel Roberts Poinsett, Secretary of War." A year-long mission?

SCENE 3

FRÉMONT at camp on his expedition. JESSIE at home.

1/FRÉMONT

Dear Jessie:

I realize that to some, a year can be an eternity. But to me, a year is merely 365 more reasons to love you.

2/JESSIE

Dearest John:

Mother thinks I will forget about you. But you cannot forget your heart, your soul, your life's breath.

1/FRÉMONT

At night, I see the stars and it makes me feel better to know that you are under those same stars.

2/JESSIE

I wish I was able to join you on your journey. To see the world through your eyes! The eyes of an explorer!

1/FRÉMONT

The news is good. We have surveyed the area very quickly and it looks like I'll be with you again shortly. Yours dearly and truly—

2/JESSIE

—Yours forever—

1/FRÉMONT

John Charles Frémont.

2/JESSIE

Jessie Benton.

* * *

2

1841. The secret wedding.

1

Jessie and John knew Jessie's parents would never allow them to get married. So they did it in private, without the Senator and Mrs. Benton present. They were furious when they found out, but it was too late and they eventually gave their blessing.

2

John and Jessie believed marriage would keep them together. But it was not to be...

As JESSIE:

A what?

1/FRÉMONT

An expedition. To map out parts of the West. And they have chosen me to lead it!