

two who had brought him the news rode back twenty-five miles and met Lieutenant Gillespie near the outlet of the lake. Again it was the eventful day of Resaca de la Palma.

There were now sixteen men in all in the camp, and as they thought the Indians in the neighborhood were friendly no watch was kept. Just before midnight, however, the camp was attacked by savages, and before the attack was repulsed three men were killed. Next morning Frémont and the survivors started back to join the main body of his party. His first care was to undertake a punitive expedition. He determined to avenge the attack on his camp, and to strike the Indians a blow which should "make them realize that Castro was far and I was near"; although what Castro had to do with the midnight assault nobody ever knew. Several villages were therefore attacked and a number of Indians miscellaneously killed. This Frémont called "a rude but necessary measure to prevent injury to the whites."¹

Having thus taken revenge, the whole party next went south and reached the American settlements on the Sacramento River, north of Sutter's, by May 24, 1846. During these two weeks Frémont had ample opportunity to consider and digest the information which was brought to him by Lieutenant Gillespie.

Gillespie had not left Washington until about the first of November, 1845, and a day or two before that he had called upon the President to take leave.

"I held a confidential conversation," the President wrote, "with Lieut. Gillespie of the Marine Corps, about 8 O'Clock P. M., on the subject of a secret mission on which he was about to go to California. His secret instructions & the letter to Mr. Larkin, U. S. Consul at Monterey, in the Department of State, will explain the object of his mission."²

The "secret instructions" must have been verbal, for none have ever been discovered in the records at Washing-

¹ See "The Conquest of California," *Century Magazine* (April, 1891), *XLI*, 924; Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, 493-496.

² Polk's *Diary*, I, 83 (Oct. 30, 1845).

ton. All the papers which Gillespie took with him for California were a duplicate of Buchanan's instruction to Larkin of October 17, personal letters of introduction from Buchanan to Larkin and Frémont, and a package of family letters from Senator Benton and Mrs. Frémont. The letters to Larkin have been published; the letters to Frémont have not, although it was upon these that Frémont relied to justify his subsequent conduct. In all the numerous and contradictory explanations which Frémont afterward gave, he always referred to Benton's letters; and he seems to have intended to account for their non-production by saying that they were in a sort of family cipher which would mean nothing to others, although to him, conversant as he was with the principal figures in Washington, they had a world of meaning.¹

Nevertheless, it is possible to guess, with some degree of probability, what were really the contents of Benton's letters. On October 24, 1845, Benton had called at the White House by invitation. He was not at that time a frequent visitor. He had been opposed to Polk's nomination, and it was only with reluctance that he had supported him on the stump. Indeed, the President seems not to have spoken to him for some months before. He now sent for Benton, solely for the purpose of discussing the Oregon question. "His manner and conversation," the President noted with apparent surprise, "were altogether pleasant and friendly, and such as they had always been in former years when I was in Congress with him." After discussing Oregon at some length,

"the conversation then turned on California on which I remarked that Great Britain had her eye on that country and intended to possess it if she could, but that the people of the U. S. would not willingly permit California to pass into the possession of any new colony planted by Great Britain or any foreign monarchy, and that in reasserting Mr. Monroe's doctrine I had California & the fine Bay of San Francisco as much in view as Oregon. Col. Benton agreed that no Foreign Power ought to be permitted to colonize California. . . . Some conversation occurred concerning Capt. Fremont's expedition, and his in-

¹ Royce's *California*, 116.

tention to visit California before his return. Col. B. expressed the opinion that Americans would settle on the Sacramento River and ultimately hold the country. The conversation on the subject of Foreign Colonization closed by a general remark that no new Foreign Colony could be permitted on any part of the North American Continent, on which there seemed to be an agreement."¹

This explanation of the President's Monroe doctrine policy, and some speculations as to the intentions of European nations and the probabilities of war with England or Mexico, or both, must have made up the staple of Benton's information. He was not otherwise in the President's confidence.

Gillespie himself never threw any light on his "secret orders." Before a committee of Congress Frémont testified that Gillespie's orders required him "to ascertain the disposition of the Californian people, to conciliate their feelings in favor of the United States, and to find out, with a design of counteracting, the designs of the British Government upon that country."² If to this, which was a mere paraphrase of the instructions to Larkin, we add further orders to confer with Frémont in case he was still in California, and to inform him of the existing state of affairs and of the instructions sent to Larkin, we may feel pretty confident that we have the whole of Gillespie's mission.

Frémont was accustomed in his later days to say that Gillespie brought official information of war with Mexico. The fact was that when Gillespie left Washington, and for more than two months afterward, the President and his cabinet were extremely hopeful of a peaceful solution through Slidell's efforts, and therefore from that quarter he could have brought no official news except news of peace.

Gillespie had reached the city of Mexico in December, 1845, and was delayed there for some time by the Paredes revolt, which rendered it impossible to get across to the Pacific. Early in the new year, however, he did manage—travelling under his own name, but in the character of a merchant in search of health and amusement—to get to

¹ Polk's *Diary*, I, 68-72.

² H. R. Report 817, 30 Cong., 1 sess., 3-4.

Mazatlan, where he made himself known to Commodore Sloat and begged for a passage to Monterey, but he told Sloat nothing of his mission.¹ Sloat sent him on the sloop-of-war *Cyane* by way of the Sandwich Islands, and he arrived at last at his destination on April 17, 1846, six months to a day after the date of the instructions which he was charged to convey to the American consul. The original of these instructions, it will be remembered, was on board the United States ship *Congress*, which at this time was lying at Callao on her leisurely journey to California.

Gillespie, who had, of course, picked up some warlike rumors in Mexico, though nothing definite so early as March, stayed two days at Monterey with Larkin, and then set out for San Francisco Bay and Sutter's Fort, where he arrived on the twenty-eighth of April. He then secured men and horses and went on to overtake Frémont, whom he joined, as has been seen, on the ninth of May, and with whom he turned back down the Sacramento valley.²

As soon as Frémont got back into the more or less settled parts of the valley he wrote to Benton, giving a short account of his meeting with Gillespie, and saying he had received nothing from Buchanan, although Benton's letter had led him to expect a communication. He himself would now proceed directly homeward by way of the Colorado, but would not reach the frontier till September.³

This letter he enclosed to Larkin, the American consul in Monterey, requesting him to forward it via Mazatlan, and promising to write more at length soon. But Gillespie, by the same messenger—Neale, one of the men who had gone with him to overtake Frémont—wrote fully to Larkin from

¹ Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, 532, 537. Sloat, on March 17, 1846, acknowledged the receipt of the orders of Oct. 17, 1845, of which Gillespie doubtless brought a duplicate.

² The subject of Gillespie's "secret mission" has been much discussed by Californian historians. Reference may be made to Royce's *California*, 129-150; Bancroft, *California*, V, 26-29, 85-89; Richman, 307-312, notes 33 and 39. Frémont's own latest versions are printed in his *Memoirs*, 488-490, and in the article entitled "The Conquest of California," published in the *Century Magazine* for April, 1891, XLI, 917-928.

³ Full text in Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, 499. Italics in the original.

"Peter Lubin's house" of his own adventures since leaving Monterey and of Frémont's plans.

"Frémont and I," he related, "came here leaving the Camp very much worn out, fifteen miles above. We have been living upon Horse-meat for some eight days without flour. There was too much snow upon the mountains to cross. He now goes home from here. I send this messenger to get such news as you have and to give us some information in relation to the vessels of war—where they are and whether the Congress has arrived. . . . Neal will give you all the news about our travel, to whom I must refer you. . . . I shall go immediately to Yerba Buena."¹

Larkin received these letters late on the evening of May 31. To Frémont he wrote, wishing him "a speedy, safe, and pleasant journey to our Capital," sending him some New York and New Orleans newspapers, and thanking him for former offers of service in Washington, which he said he would not claim at that time. To Buchanan, Larkin wrote, giving an account of the movements of Frémont and Gillespie as reported by the latter, and saying that "Captain Frémont now starts for the States."²

As stated in his letter to Larkin, Gillespie had previously arranged with Frémont to go down the Sacramento River to Yerba Buena (San Francisco), the purpose being to try to get supplies from some American man-of-war; and though they did not know whether any such vessel was to be met with, Frémont drew up and signed a letter to Gillespie containing a list of what was wanted, and saying that if these articles could be got from "our Squadron" it would "materially aid the surveys with which I am charged and very much expedite my return to the States."³ What he said he needed was lead, powder, percussion-caps, sugar, coffee, tea, pork, tobacco, medicines, and other things that might very well be useful to an exploring expedition. They might also be useful in a raid on the Mexican villages.

¹ Frémont to Larkin; Gillespie to Larkin, May 24, 1846; Bancroft Collection (Univ. of California) MSS.

² Larkin to Frémont, May 31, 1846; Larkin to Buchanan, June 1, 1846; *ibid.*

³ See text in Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, 504.

Leaving Frémont encamped on the Sacramento at the mouth of the Feather River (some fifteen miles above Sutter's settlement), Gillespie reached San Francisco Bay by boat about the eighth of June and found the United States sloop-of-war *Portsmouth*, Commander Montgomery, at anchor at Yerba Buena. The *Portsmouth* had been detached by Commodore Sloat as soon as he received Larkin's letter of March 9 telling of the prospects of a fight between Frémont and the Mexicans. She had reached Monterey on April 22, and her surprised commander then learned from the consul that the country had been quiet for six months past, and that Castro's menaces against Frémont were intended only as a basis for high-flown despatches to Mexico! After nine days at Monterey the *Portsmouth* had come to San Francisco, bringing Neale on his way back to Sutter's with Larkin's letter to Frémont.

Before Gillespie's arrival Captain Montgomery had written to Frémont asking whether he could be of any service;¹ and therefore, when Gillespie did come, having crossed Montgomery's messenger (Neale) on the way, Montgomery was very ready to furnish him with all that was asked, and also to lend, at Gillespie's suggestion, fifteen hundred dollars in money.²

It is hard to read this mass of correspondence without feeling convinced that Frémont, at least up to the time Gillespie left him to go to the coast—that is, up to about the twenty-eighth of May—was resolved to go back to the United States. He did, indeed, talk of going to Santa Barbara and of returning home by way of the Colorado River; but while such a journey involved a sort of Donnybrook invitation to Castro, it did not apparently contemplate a deliberate attack on the Mexicans.³

That Gillespie's persuasions, or his information concern-

¹ Montgomery to Frémont, June 3, 1846; *ibid.*, 518.

² Gillespie to Montgomery, June 9, 1846; *ibid.*, 504. See also Montgomery to Frémont, June 10, 1846; *ibid.*, 519.

³ There is some evidence that he had in the previous February ordered supplies to be sent for him to Santa Barbara. See Kelsey's *U. S. Consulate in California*, 96.

ing the state of affairs with Mexico, falling on the vain and egotistical mind of Frémont, were the cause of his movements up to this date is hardly open to doubt; and the chief argument which the tempter used seems likely to have been the necessity Frémont was under of giving a proof of his courage to the world. It was at any rate prominently put forward in Frémont's first explanation.

"You will remember," he wrote to Benton, "how grossly outraged and insulted we had already been by this officer (Castro); many in my own camp, and throughout the country, thought that I should not have retreated in March last. I felt humiliated and humbled; one of the main objects proposed by this expedition had been entirely defeated, and it was the opinion of the officers of the squadron (so I was informed by Mr. Gillespie) that I could not again retreat consistently with any military reputation."¹

His first idea, therefore, seems to have been to march the whole length of California, so as to give Castro an opportunity of attacking him; and this he conceived to be a compliance with the distinct orders of the United States government to use every effort to conciliate the inhabitants of the country! But in the absence of positive contemporaneous evidence it is only possible to form more or less plausible conjectures as to Frémont's state of mind at this time. What his intentions soon afterward became is certain.

The American settlers up and down the Sacramento valley were a rough and ignorant set of frontiersmen, suspicious, afraid alike of the Indians and the "Spaniards," and ready to believe and act on the most absurd rumors. There was, however, in the spring of 1846 a basis of solid fact for their suspicions. First of all, Frémont and his men were seen retreating before the Mexicans, who were said to have driven them from the neighborhood of Monterey. Then American and British ships of war were coming and going on the coast. Gillespie, an American officer, appeared and set off in hot haste after Frémont; and finally, after an interval, he returned in company with Frémont and all his men.

¹ Frémont to Benton, July 25, 1846; Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, 545.

What, the settlers might naturally ask, did all this mean? The meaning would hardly have mattered if the settlers had felt confident of their own status; but even the most ignorant must have known that they were residing in California in open defiance of Mexican laws, that they had no title to their lands, and that they never could acquire title without at least becoming Mexican citizens. The law on the subject was perfectly well known and had been repeatedly called to public attention.

Thus in July, 1845, the Governor of California was instructed to issue "the most positive orders" against the migration of American families "from the Missouri and Columbia." The orders were duly issued, but as no attempt was ever made to enforce them the immigrants came faster than ever.¹ In April, 1846, Manuel Castro, the prefect at Monterey, reiterated the warnings so often given before, by issuing a sort of proclamation, copies of which were sent to subprefects, alcaldes, consuls, consular agents, and others.

"Being informed," ran this document, "that a multitude of foreigners, taking advantage of our local circumstances, without having come with the requisites provided by law, are residing in the district, and that many of them who should not even be admitted into this country have taken possession of real property well-knowing the law on this subject, I have concluded to instruct all judges in charge of settlements that they cannot, without incurring great responsibility, permit or authorize any sale or cession whatever of land, or of said class of property, except in accordance with law and in favor of Mexican citizens; advising the foreigners who are not naturalized and legally in the country that whatever purchase or acquisition they may make of land will be null and void; and that these persons will be subject, unless they retire voluntarily from the country, to be expelled from it whenever the Government may find it convenient."²

This paper, which was perhaps seen by some of the settlers, and heard of in an inaccurate and garbled form by many more, was a mild and accurate statement of unques-

¹ Cuevas to Pico, July 10, 1845; Bancroft, *California*, IV, 605.

² Bancroft Collection (Univ. of California). An inaccurate translation is printed in Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, 503; and see Bancroft, *California*, IV, 503.

tioned law. The difference between the settlers in Texas and the settlers in California was as wide as the distance between the East and the West. The Texas settlers were invited to come and were offered grants of land. The California settlers occupied their lands in the teeth of the law, and in spite of reiterated public warnings. But they cared nothing at all for Mexican warnings.

The truth is that the Americans in the Sacramento valley and the hundreds who were toiling along the Oregon trail and across the mountain passes, looked upon the Mexicans in precisely the same light as European colonists looked on the natives of Australia or Africa or America. "Castro," to them, was a vague embodiment of some barbarous and incomprehensible authority, and they spoke of him and regarded him just as the seventeenth-century Englishmen who came to Virginia and Massachusetts spoke of Powhatan and Massasoit. And just as the English, when they wrote home, described Powhatan as a great emperor ruling over vast territories and with many princes in his train, so "Castro" and his few ragged followers were described as if Don José were a real general at the head of a real army. The American settlers in California could not understand "Castro's" laws or his language, and they had not the smallest intention of obeying the one or learning the other. They saw that he had vast and fertile lands, which were entirely unoccupied and which they intended to acquire for themselves. If he objected he was to be pacified and humored, but if he proved troublesome he was to be knocked on the head with as little compunction as a wild beast who should venture to attack them.

Rumor, founded on fact, asserted that "Castro" was gathering large bodies of troops at Santa Clara, and it was said that the object of this great armament was to march north to attack the Americans. The literal truth was that José Castro, who was at odds with Governor Pio Pico, of Los Angeles, had got together some seventy men with the purpose of marching south to fight the governor. It was also asserted that "Castro" was stirring up the Indians to

attack the settlers, and as a proof of this allegation Frémont said that a man named Hensley said that Sutter said that the Cosumne Indian chief said that Castro said he would give great rewards if the Indians would burn the crops of the settlers.¹

Such stories passing from mouth to mouth through the valley inevitably drew the settlers one after another to Frémont's camp to relate and hear the latest tales, and the result was a conviction in their minds that something must be done to protect the Americans from Spanish outrage. Frémont certainly did nothing to disabuse their minds of the nonsense that was being circulated. How far he encouraged them is perhaps doubtful, but it is perfectly clear that his camp was a centre from which the most alarming stories spread, and that it attracted all the vagabonds and landless men in the country.

José Castro, lying at Santa Clara with his handful of Mexicans, sent one of his lieutenants, a man by the name of Francisco Arce, to Vallejo at Sonoma to buy or borrow some horses; and Arce, about the sixth of June, started on his return with a herd of one hundred and seventy head. The story reached Frémont's camp, and the conclusion was at once arrived at that these horses were intended to enable Castro to move against the settlers. The necessity of seizing the horses to thwart Castro's plans was an inevitable corollary, and accordingly a party of Americans, under the lead of one Ezekiel Merritt, set out, with Frémont's full knowledge and consent, if not by his direction, to capture the horses.² They had not the least difficulty in doing so. They surprised the unsuspecting Don Francisco and his

¹ Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, 506.

² In conversation with Professor Royce, Frémont said he chose Arce's passing with the horses as the right moment for action, that he instructed the men in what it was needful for them to know, and that Merritt, who was "a good man," had instructions about taking the horses and subsequent proceedings. "I fully suppose and believe," notes Professor Royce, "that General Frémont must be here understood to use the word 'good' as a relative term,—relative, namely, to the business of taking horses by violence."—(Royce's *California*, 120.) "A coarse-grained, loud-mouthed, unprincipled, whiskey-drinking, quarrelsome fellow," is the character given Merritt by another historian.—(Bancroft, *California*, 738.)

men at dawn on the tenth of June, and took the horses back to Frémont's camp. All of the Mexican party were allowed to go their way, with a message that if Castro wanted the horses he might come and get them.

The next step was to take Sonoma, the only Mexican settlement of any consequence in the region north of San Francisco Bay, and on the afternoon of the eleventh of June twenty men, still under the lead of Merritt, started out from Frémont's camp. They were joined on the way by other casual Americans, and just before dawn on the morning of Sunday, the fourteenth of June, they waked up the inoffensive little village, took prisoners Mariano Vallejo, the great man of the place, his brother Salvador, his brother-in-law, Jacob P. Leese, and his secretary, Victor Prudon. These four unresisting captives were sent off to Frémont, and the captors then began to consider what they were to do with their prize. After long debate and considerable consumption of *aguardiente*, the thirty-two or three men who had taken Sonoma agreed to declare California an independent republic, with themselves as the governing body, and they hoisted a flag on which they had painted a bear, as the symbol of the new nation.

Mischief was now indeed afoot. "Domestic fury and fierce civil strife" were declared in northern California, and José Castro, on his part, cried havoc, and did his best to let slip the dogs of war. His cry was not very loud and his dogs could not do much but bark; but they did what they could. He issued two proclamations denouncing "the contemptible policy of the agents of the government of the United States," which had induced a number of adventurers to seize Sonoma, and he called upon his fellow-citizens to rise *en masse*, "irresistible and just." Peaceable foreigners, he declared, would not be molested. As for himself, he was a Mexican soldier who would be free and independent, and who would die with pleasure for those inestimable blessings.¹ He also wrote at the same time to Commander Montgomery, of the *Portsmouth*, saying that Captain Frémont, "without

¹ Bancroft, *California*, V, 133.

the formalities established among civilized nations," had invaded the country and seized Sonoma; to which Montgomery replied indignantly that Frémont had had nothing to do with the Sonoma affair, and that for Castro to accuse him of it was an insult to the American government.¹

The Bear Flag party at the same time sent to Montgomery for powder. They undoubtedly supposed that he, as well as Frémont, was backing their enterprise, and they were a good deal astonished at receiving a letter from him which deserves mention as setting forth the whole duty of an American officer at that time and place. He had been on the point, he said, of sending an officer to inquire into the movement which had caused so much alarm, when the Bear Flag messenger arrived. The circumstances which had led to the hasty organization of the foreigners he had heard of vaguely. He held it to be the privilege of all men to resist oppression. He was glad to learn that the helpless people near Sonoma were to be kindly treated.

"Permit me, sir," he continued, "in response to your call for powder for the use of your party, to say that I am here as a representative of a government at peace (as far as I know) with Mexico and her province of California, having in charge the interests and the security of the commerce and citizens of the United States lawfully engaged in their pursuits, and have no right or authority to furnish munitions of war, or in any manner to take sides with any political party, or even indirectly to identify myself, or official name, with any popular movement (whether of foreign or native residents) of the country, and thus, sir, must decline giving the required aid."²

On the same day Frémont was writing to Montgomery from Sutter's Fort that the people of that neighborhood had made some movements with a view to establishing a settled and stable government; that both the people and authorities of the country persisted in connecting him with every movement; and that he was in hourly expectation of the approach of Castro. The unexpected hostility of the military authorities of California had thus, he continued,

¹ *Century Magazine*, XLI, 782 (March, 1891).

² Montgomery to Ide, June 16, 1846; Frémont's *Memoirs*, I, 524.