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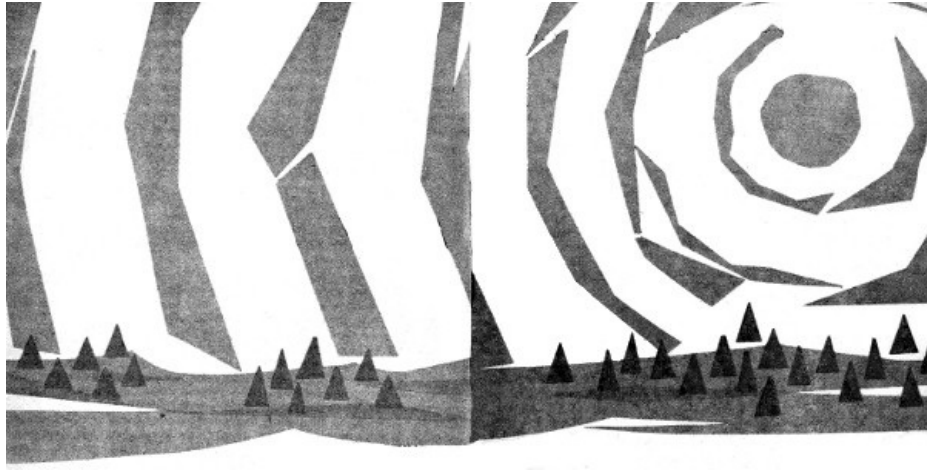


# **FARMER**

**By MACK REYNOLDS**

**Illustrated by RITTER**

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***Someone out there didn't like trees.  
He wanted to wreck the Sahara Project—and  
he was willing to murder in the process!***

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I

One of the auto-copters swooped in and landed. Johnny McCord emptied his pipe into the wastebasket, came to his feet and strolled toward the open door. He automatically took up a sun helmet before emerging into the Saharan sun.

He was dressed in khaki shorts and short-sleeved shirt, wool socks and yellow Moroccan babouche slippers.

The slippers were strictly out of uniform and would have been frowned upon by Johnny's immediate superiors. However, the Arabs had been making footwear suitable for sandy terrain for centuries before there had ever been a Sahara Reforestation Commission. Johnny was in favor of taking advantage of their know-how. Especially since the top brass made a point of staying in the swank air-conditioned buildings of Colomb-Bechar, Tamanrasset and Timbuktu, from whence they issued lengthy bulletins on the necessity of never allowing a Malian to see a Commission employee in less than the correct dress and in less than commanding dignity. While they were busily at work composing such directives, field men such as Johnny McCord went about the Commission's real tasks.

It was auto-copter 4, which Johnny hadn't expected for another half hour. He extracted the reports and then peered into the cockpit to check. There were two red lights flickering on the panel. Work for Reuben. This damned sand was a perpetual hazard to equipment. Number 4 had just had an overhaul a few weeks before and here it was throwing red lights already.

He took the reports back into the office and dumped them into the card-punch. While they were being set up, Johnny went over to the office refrigerator and got out a can of Tuborg beer. Theoretically, it was as taboo to drink iced beer in this climate, and particularly at this time of day, as it was to go out into the sun without a hat. But this was one place where the Commission's medics could go blow.

By the time he'd finished the Danish brew, the card-punch had stopped clattering so he took the cards from the hopper and crossed to the sorter. He gave them a quick joggling—cards held up well in this dry climate, though they were a terror further south—and sorted them through four code numbers, enough for this small an amount. He carried them over to the collator and merged them into the proper file.

He was still running off a report on the Alphabetyper when Derek Mason came in.

Johnny drawled in a horrible caricature of a New England accent, "I say, Si, did the cyclone hurt your barn any?"

Derek's voice took on the same twang. "Don't know, Hiram, we ain't found it yet."

Johnny said, "You get all your chores done, Si?"

Derek dropped the pseudo-twang and his voice expressed disgust. "I got a chore for you Johnny, that you're going to love. Rounding up some livestock."

Johnny looked up from the report he was running off and shot an impatient glance at him. "Livestock? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Goats."

Johnny McCord flicked the stop button on the Alphabetyper. "Where've you been? There isn't a goat within five hundred miles of here."

Derek went over to the refrigerator for beer. He said over his shoulder, "I was just making a routine patrol over toward Amérene El Kasbach. I'd estimate there were a hundred Tuareg in camp there. Camels, a few sheep, a few horses and donkeys. Mostly goats. Thousands of them. By the looks of the transplants, they've been there possibly a week or so."

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Johnny said in agony, "Oh, Lord. What clan were they?"

Derek punched a hole in his beer can with the opener that hung from the refrigerator by a string. "I didn't go low enough to check. You can never tell with a Tuareg. They can't resist as beautiful a target as a helicopter, and one of these days one of them is going to make a hole in me, instead of in the fuselage or rotors."

Johnny McCord, furious, plunked himself down before the telephone and dialed Tessalit, 275 kilometers to the south. The girl on the desk there grinned at him and said, "Hello, Johnny."

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Johnny McCord was in no mood for pleasantries. He snapped, "Who's supposed to be on Bedouin patrol down there?"

She blinked at him. "Why, Mohammed is in command of patrolling this area, Mr. McCord."

"Mohammed? Mohammed who? Eighty percent of these Malians are named Mohammed."

"Captain Mohammed Mohmoud oud Cheikh." She added, unnecessarily, "The Cadi's son."

Johnny grunted. He'd always suspected that the captain had got his ideas of what a cadi's son should be like from seeing Hollywood movies. "Look, Kate," he said. "Let me talk to Mellor, will you?"

Her face faded to be replaced by that of a highly tanned, middle-aged executive type. He scowled at Johnny McCord with a this-better-be-important expression, not helping Johnny's disposition.

He snapped, "Somebody's let several thousand goats into my eucalyptus transplants in my western four hundred."

Mellor was taken aback.

Johnny said, "I can have Derek back-trail them, if you want to be sure, but it's almost positive they came from the south, this time of year."

Mellor sputtered, "They might have come from the direction of Timmissao. Who are they, anyway?"

"I don't know. Tuareg. I thought we'd supposedly settled with all the Tuareg. Good Lord, man, do

you know how many transplants a thousand goats can go through in a week's time?"

"A week's time!" Mellor rasped. "You mean you've taken a whole week to detect them?"

Johnny McCord glared at him. "A *whole* week! We're lucky they didn't spend the whole *season* before we found them. How big a staff do you think we have here, Mellor? There's just three of us. Only one can be spared for patrol."

"You have natives," the older man growled.

"They can't fly helicopters. Most of them can't even drive a Land Rover or a jeep. Besides that, they're scared to death of Tuaregs. They wouldn't dare report them. What I want to know is, why didn't you stop them coming through?"

Mellor was on the defensive. He ranked Johnny McCord, but that was beside the point right now. He said finally, "I'll check this all the way through, McCord. Meanwhile, I'll send young Mohammed Mohmoud up with a group of his men."

"To do what?" Johnny demanded.

"To shoot the goats, what else?"

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Johnny growled, "One of these days a bunch of these Tuareg are going to decide that a lynching bee is in order, and that's going to be the end of this little base at Bidon Cinq."

Mellor said, "If they're Tuareg nomads then they have no legal right to be within several hundred miles of Bidon Cinq. And if they've got goats, they shouldn't have. The Commission has bought up every goat in this part of the world."

Johnny growled, "Sure, bought them up and then left it to the honor of the Tuareg to destroy them. The honor of the Tuareg! Ha!"

The other said pompously, "Are you criticizing the upper echelons, McCord?"

Johnny McCord snapped, "You're damned right I am." He slammed off the telephone and turned on Derek Mason. "What are you grinning about?"

Derek drawled, "I say, Hiram, I got a sneaky suspicion you ain't never gonna graduate off'n this here farm if you don't learn how to cotton up to the city slickers better."

"Oh, shut up," Johnny growled. "Let's have another beer."

Before Derek could bring it to him, the telephone screen lit up again and Paul Peterson, of the Poste Weygand base, was there. He said, "Hi. You guys look like you're having a crisis."

"Hello, Paul," Johnny McCord said. "Crisis is right. Those jerks down south let a clan of Tuareg, complete with a few thousand goats, camels and sheep through. They've been grazing a week or more in my west four hundred."

"Good grief." Paul grimaced. "At least that's one thing we don't have to worry about. They never get this far up. How'd it happen?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out. I haven't seen the mess yet, but it's certain to wreck that whole four hundred. Have you ever seen just one goat at work on the bark of three-year transplants?"

Paul shuddered sympathetically. "Look, Johnny," he said. "The reason I called you. There's an air-cushion Land Rover coming through. She just left."

Derek Mason looked over Johnny's shoulder into the screen. "What d'ya mean, *she*?"

Paul grinned. "Just that, and, Buster, she's stacked. A Mademoiselle H el ene Desage of *Paris Match*."

Johnny said, "The French magazine? What's she doing in a road car? Why doesn't she have an aircraft? There hasn't been a road car through here this whole year."

Paul shrugged. "She claims she's getting it from the viewpoint of how things must've been twenty years ago. So, anyway, we've notified you. If she doesn't turn up in eight or ten hours, you better send somebody to look for her."

"Yeah," Johnny McCord said. "Well, so long, Paul."

The other's face faded from the screen and Johnny McCord turned to his colleague. "One more extraneous something to foul up our schedule."

Derek said mildly, "I say, Hiram, what're you complaining about? Didn't you hear tell what Paul just said? She's stacked. Be just like a traveling saleswoman visitin' the farm."

"Yeah," Johnny growled. "And I can see just how much work I'll be getting out of you as long as she's here."

Poste Maurice Cortier, better known in the Sahara as Bidon Cinq, is as remote a spot on earth in which man has ever lived. Some 750 kilometers to the south is Bourem on the Niger river. If you go west of Bourem another 363 kilometers, you reach Timbuktu, the nearest thing to a city in that part of the Sudan. If you travel north from Bidon Cinq 1,229 kilometers you reach Colomb-Béchar, the nearest thing to a city in southern Algeria. There are no railroads, no highways. The track through the desert is marked by oil drums filled with gravel so the wind won't blow them away. There is an oil drum every quarter of a mile or so. You go from one to the next, carrying your own fuel and water. If you get lost, the authorities come looking for you in aircraft. Sometimes they find you.

In the latter decades of the Twentieth Century, Bidon Cinq became an outpost of the Sahara Reforestation Commission which was working north from the Niger, and south from Algeria as well as east from the Atlantic. The water table in the vicinity of Bidon Cinq was considerably higher than had once been thought. Even artesian wells were possible in some localities. More practical still were springs and wells exploited by the new solar-powered pumps that in their tens of thousands were driving back the sands of the world's largest desert.

Johnny McCord and Derek Mason ate in the officer's mess, divorced from the forty or fifty Arabs and Songhai who composed their work force. It wasn't snobbery, simply a matter of being able to eat in leisure and discuss the day's activities free of the chatter of the larger mess hall.

Derek looked down into his plate. "Hiram," he drawled, "who ever invented this here *cous cous*?"

Johnny looked over at the tall, easy-going Canadian who was his second in command and scowled dourly. He was in no humor for their usual banter. "What's the matter with *cous cous*?" Johnny growled.

"I don't know," Derek said. "I'm a meat and potatoes man at heart."

Johnny shrugged. "*Cous cous* serves the same purpose as potatoes do. Or rice, or spaghetti, or bread, or any of the other bland basic foods. It's what you put on it that counts."

Derek stared gloomily into his dish. "Well, I wish they'd get something more interesting than ten-year-old mutton to put on this."

Johnny said, "Where in the devil is Pierre? It's nearly dark."

"Reuben?" Derek drawled. "Why Reuben went out to check the crops up in the northeast forty. Took the horse and buggy."

That didn't help Johnny's irritation. "He took an air-cushion jeep, instead of a copter? Why, for heaven's sake?"

"He wanted to check quite a few of the pumps. Said landing and taking off was more trouble than the extra speed helped. He'll be back shortly."

"He's back now," a voice from the door said.

Pierre Marimbert, brushing sand from his clothes, pushed into the room and made his way to the mess-hall refrigerator. He said nothing further until he had a can of beer open.

Johnny said, "Damn it, Pierre, you shouldn't stay out this late in a jeep. If you got stuck out there, we'd have one hell of a time finding you. In a copter you've at least got the radio."

Pierre had washed the dust from his throat. Now he said quietly, "I wanted to check on as many pumps as I could."

"You could have gone back tomorrow. The things are supposed to be self-sufficient, no checking necessary more than once every three months. There's practically nothing that can go wrong with them."

Pierre finished off the can of beer, reached into the refrigerator for another. "Dynamite can go wrong with them," he said.

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The other two looked at him, shocked silent.

Pierre said, "I don't know how many altogether. I found twenty-two of the pumps in the vicinity of In Ziza had been blown to smithereens—out of forty I checked."

Johnny rapped, "How long ago? How many trees...?"

Pierre laughed sourly. "I don't know how long ago. The transplants, especially the slash pine, are going to be just so much kindling before I get new pumps in."

Derek said, shocked, "That's our oldest stand."

Pierre Marimbert, a forty-year-old, sun-beaten Algerian *colon*, eldest man on the team, sank into his place at the table. He poured the balance of his can of beer into a glass.

Johnny said, "What ... what can we do? How many spare pumps can you get into there, and how soon?"

Pierre looked up at him wearily. "You didn't quite hear what I said, Johnny. I only checked forty. Forty out of nearly a thousand in that vicinity. Twenty-two of them were destroyed, better than fifty percent. For all I know, that percentage applies throughout the whole In Ziza area. If so, there's damn few of your trees going to be left alive. We have a few spare pumps on hand here,

but we'd have to get a really large number all the way from Dakar."

Derek said softly, "That took a lot of men and a lot of dynamite. Which means a lot of transport—and a lot of money. We've had trouble before, but usually it was disgruntled nomads, getting revenge for losing their grazing land."

Johnny snorted, "Damn little grazing this far north."

Derek nodded. "I'm simply saying that even if we could blame our minor sabotage on the Tuareg in the past, we can't do it this time. There's money behind anything this big."

Johnny McCord said wearily, "Let's eat. In the morning we'll go out and take a look. I'd better call Timbuktu on this. If nothing else, the Mali Federation can send troops out to protect us."

Derek grunted. "With a standing army of about 25,000 men, they're going to patrol a million and a half square miles of desert?"

"Can you think of anything else to do?"

"No."

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Pierre Marimbert began dishing *cous cous* into a soup plate, then poured himself a glass of *vin ordinaire*. He said, "I can't think of a better place for saboteurs. Twenty men could do millions of dollars of destruction and never be found."

Johnny growled, "It's not as bad as all that. They've got to eat and drink, and so do their animals. There are damned few places where they can."

From the door a voice said, "I am intruding?"

They hadn't heard her car come up. The three men scrambled to their feet.

"Good evening," Johnny McCord blurted.

"Hell ... o!" Derek breathed.

Pierre Marimbert was across the room, taking her in hand. "*Bonjour, Mademoiselle. Que puis-je faire pour vous? Voulez-vous une biere bien fraiche ou un apéritif? Il fait très chaud dans le desert.*" He led her toward the table.

"Easy, easy there, Reuben," Derek grumbled. "The young lady speaks English. Give a man a chance."

Johnny was placing a chair for her. "Paul Peterson, from Poste Weygand, radioed that you were coming. You're a little late, Mademoiselle Desage."

She was perhaps thirty, slim, long-legged, Parisian style. Even at Bidon Cinq, half a world away from the Champs Elysées, she maintained her chic.

She made a moue at Johnny, while taking the chair he held. "I had hoped to surprise you, catch you off guard." She took in the sun-dried, dour-faced American wood technologist appraisingly, then turned her eyes in turn to Derek and Pierre.

"You three are out here all alone?" she said demurely.

"Desperately," Derek said.

Johnny McCord said, "Mademoiselle Hélène Desage, I am John McCord, and these are my associates, Monsieur Pierre Marimbert and Mr. Derek Mason. Gentlemen, Mademoiselle Desage is with *Paris Match*, the French equivalent of *Life*, so I understand. In short, she is undoubtedly here for a story. So ixnay on the ump-pays."

"I would love cold beer," Hélène Desage said to Pierre, and to Johnny McCord, "These days a traveling reporter for *Paris Match* must be quite a linguist. My English, Spanish and Italian are excellent. My German passable. And while I am not fluent in Pig-Latin, I can follow it. What is this you are saying about the pumps?"

"Oh, Lord," Johnny said. "Perhaps I'll tell you in the morning. But for now, would you like to clean up before supper? You must be exhausted after that 260 kilometers from Poste Weygand."

Pierre said hurriedly, "I'll take Mademoiselle Desage over to one of the guest bungalows."

"Zut!" she said. "The sand! It is even worse than between Reggan and Poste Weygand. Do you realize that until I began coming across your new forests I saw no life at all between these two posts?"

The three forestry experts bowed in unison, as though rehearsed. "Mademoiselle," Derek, from the heart, "calling our transplant forests is the kindest thing you could have said in these parts."

They all laughed and Pierre led her from the room.

Derek looked at Johnny McCord. "Wow, that was a slip mentioning the pumps."

Johnny was looking through the door after her. "I suppose so," he said sourly. "I'll have to radio the brass and find out the line we're supposed to take with her. That's the biggest magazine in the French-speaking world and you don't get a job on it without knowing the journalistic ropes. That girl can probably smell a story as far as a Tuareg can smell water."

"Well, then undoubtedly she's already sniffing. Because, between that clan of Tuareg with its

flocks and the pump saboteurs, we've got more stories around here than I ever expected!"

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### III

In the morning H el ene Desage managed to look the last word in what desert fashion should be, when she strolled into Johnny McCord's office. Although she came complete with a sun helmet that must have been the product of a top Parisian shop, she would have been more at place on the beaches at Miami, Honolulu or Cannes. Her shorts were short and fitting, her blouse silken, her walking shoes dainty.

He considered for a moment and then decided against informing her that Moslems, particularly in this part of the world, were little used to seeing semi-nude women strolling about. He'd leave the job of explanation to Pierre, as a fellow Frenchman and the oldest man present to boot.

"*Bonjour*," she said. "What a lovely day. I have been strolling about your little oasis. But you have made it a garden!"

"Thanks," Johnny said. "We've got to have something to do after working hours. Entertainment is on the scarce side. But it's more than a garden. We've been experimenting to see just what trees will take to this country—given water and care through the early years. Besides, we use it as a showplace."

"Showplace?"

"For skeptical politicians who come through," Johnny said, seating her in a chair near his desk. "We give them the idea that the whole Sahara could eventually be like this square mile or so at Bidon Cinq. Palm trees, fruit trees, pines, shade trees. The works."

"And could it?"

Johnny grinned sourly. "Well, not exactly. Not all in one spot, at least. You've got to remember, the Sahara covers an area of some three and a half million square miles. In that area you find almost everything."

"Everything except water, eh?" She was tapping a cigarette on a polish-reddened thumbnail. As he lit it for her, Johnny McCord realized that he hadn't seen fingernail polish for a year. He decided it was too long.

"Even water, in some parts," he said. "There's more water than most people realize. For instance, the Niger, which runs right through a considerable part of the Sahara, is the eleventh largest river in the world. But until our commission went to work on it, it dumped itself into the Gulf of Guinea, unused."

"The Niger is a long way from here," she said through her smoke.

He nodded. "For that matter, though, we have a certain amount of rain, particularly in the highland regions of the central massif. In the past, with no watershed at all, it ran off, buried itself in the sands, or evaporated."

"Mr. McCord," she said, "you are amazingly optimistic. Formerly, I must admit I had little knowledge of the Sahara Reforestation Commission. And I deliberately avoided studying up on the subject after receiving this assignment, because I wanted first impression to be received on the spot. However, I've just driven across the Sahara. My impression is that your Commission is one great—*Comment dit-on?*—boon-doggling project, a super-W.P.A. into which to plow your American resources and manpower. It is a fake, a delusion. This part of the world has never been anything but wasteland, and never will be."

Johnny McCord heard her out without change in expression.

He'd been through this before. In fact, almost every time a junketing congressman came through. There was danger in the viewpoint, of course. If the fantastic sums of money which were being spent were cut off, such pessimistic views would become automatically correct.

He took the paperweight from a stack of the correspondence on his desk and handed it to her.

She looked at it and scowled—very prettily, but still a scowl. "What is this? It's a beautiful piece of stone."

"I picked it up myself," Johnny said. "Near Reggan. It's a chunk of petrified wood, Miss Desage. From a tree that must have originally had a diameter of some ten feet. Not quite a redwood, of course, but big."

"Yes," she said, turning it over in her hand. "I can see this part, which must have once been bark. But why do you show it to me?"

"The Sahara was once a semi-tropical, moist area, highly wooded. It can become so again."

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She put the piece of fossil back on his desk. "How long ago?" she said bluntly.

"A very long time ago, admittedly. During the last Ice Age and immediately afterwards. But, given man's direction, it can be done again. And it must be."



She raised pencilled eyebrows at him. "Must be?"

Johnny McCord shifted in his chair. "You must be aware of the world's population explosion, Miss Desage. The human race can't allow three and a half million square miles of land to be valueless." He grunted in deprecation. "And at the rate it was going, it would have been four million before long."

She didn't understand.

Johnny spelled it out for her. "A desert can be man-made. Have you ever been in the Middle East?" At her nod, he went on. "Visitors there usually wonder how in the world the ancient Jews could ever have thought of that area as a land of milk and honey. On the face of it, it's nothing but badlands. What was once the Fertile Crescent now looks like Arizona."

Hélène Desage was frowning at him. "And you suggest man did this—not nature?"

"The goat did it. The goat, and the use of charcoal as fuel. Along with ignorance of soil erosion and the destruction of the wonderful watershed based on the Cedars of Lebanon. Same thing applies to large areas of Libya and Tunisia, and to Morocco and Spain. Those countries used to be some of the richest agricultural areas of the Roman Empire. But you can't graze goats, probably the most destructive animal domesticated, and you can't depend on charcoal for fuel, unless you want to create desert."

"Those things happened a long time ago."

Johnny snorted. "When we first began operations, the Sahara was going south at the rate of two miles a year. Goats prefer twigs and bark even to grass. They strip a country."

"Well," the reporter said, shrugging shapely shoulders, "at any rate, the task is one of such magnitude as to be fantastic. Yesterday, I drove for nearly eight hours without seeing even a clump of cactus."

"The route you traveled is comparatively untouched by our efforts, thus far," Johnny nodded agreeably. "However, we're slowly coming down from Algeria, up from the Niger, and, using the new chemical methods of freshening sea water, east from Mauretania."

He came to his feet and pointed out spots on the large wall map. "Our territory, of course, is only this area which once was called French West Africa, plus Algeria. The battle is being fought elsewhere by others. The Egyptians and Sudanese are doing a fairly good job in their country, with Soviet Complex help. The Tunisians are doing a wonderful job with the assistance of Common Europe, especially Italy."

She stood beside him and tried to understand. "What is this area, here, shaded green?"

He said proudly, "That's how far we've got so far, heading north from the Niger. In the past, the desert actually came down to the side of the river in many places. The water was completely wasted. Now we've diverted it and are reforesting anywhere up to three miles a year."

"Three miles a year," she scoffed. "You'll take five centuries."

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He shook his head and grinned. "It's a progressive thing. Water is admittedly the big problem. But as our forests grow, they themselves bring up the moisture content of the climate. Down in this area—" he made a sweeping gesture over the map which took in large sections north of the Niger—"we've put in hundreds of millions of slash pine, which is particularly good for sandy soil and fast growing. In ten years you've gone from two-year-old seedlings to a respectable forest."

Johnny pointed out Bidon Cinq on the map. "At the same time we found what amounts to a subterranean sea in this area. Not a real sea, of course, but a water-bearing formation or aquifer, deep down under the surface of the earth—layers of rock and gravel in which large quantities of water are lying. The hydro-geological technicians who surveyed it estimate that it holds reserves of several billion tons of water. Utilizing it, we've put in several hundred square miles of seedlings and transplants of various varieties. Where there are natural oases, of course, we stress a lot of date palm. In rocky areas it's *acacia tortila*. In the mountains we sometimes use varieties of the pinyon—they'll take quite a beating but are a little on the slow-growing side."

She was looking at him from the sides of her eyes. "You're all taken up by this, aren't you Mr. McCord?"

Johnny said, surprise in his voice. "Why, it's my work."

Derek came sauntering in and scaled his sun helmet onto his own desk. "Good morning, Mademoiselle," he said. And to Johnny, "Hiram, that city slicker from Timbuktu just came up with his posse."

Hélène said, "What is this *Si*, *Hiram* and *Reuben* which you call each other?"

Johnny smiled sourly, "In a way, Miss Desage, this is just one great tree farm. And all of us are farmers. So we make jokes about it." He thought for a moment. "Derek, possibly you better take over with Mohammed. I want to get over to In Ziza with Reuben."

"To see about the pumps?" Hélène said innocently.

Johnny frowned but was saved from an answer by the entrance of Mohammed Mohmoud. He was dark as a Saharan becomes dark, his original Berber blood to be seen only in his facial

characteristics. He wore the rather flamboyant Mali Federation desert uniform with an air.

When he saw the girl, his eyebrows rose and he made the Moslem salaam with a sweeping flourish.

Johnny said, "Mademoiselle Desage, may I present Captain Mohammed Mohmoud ould Cheikh, of the Mali desert patrol." He added sourly, "The officer in charge of preventing nomads from filtering up from the south into our infant forests."

The Moslem scowled at him. "They could have come from the east, from Timmissao," he said in quite passable English. "Or even from Mauritania." He turned his eyes to Hélène Desage. "*Enchanté, Mademoiselle. Très heureux de faire ta connaissance.*"

She gave him the full benefit of her eyes. "*Moi aussi, Monsieur.*"

Johnny wasn't through with the Malian officer. "There's a hundred of them," he snapped, "with several thousand head of goats and other livestock. It would have been impossible to push that number across from Mauritania or even from the east, and you know it."

A lighter complexion would have shown a flush. Mohammed Mohmoud's displeasure was limited in expression to a flashing of desert eyes. He said, "Wherever their origin, the task would seem to be immediately to destroy the animals. That is why my men and I are here."

Pierre Marimbert had entered while the conversation was going on. He said, "Johnny, weren't you going over to In Ziza with me?"

Hélène Desage said, the tip of her right forefinger to her chin as she portrayed thought, "I can't decide where to go. To this crisis of the Tuareg, or to the crisis of the pumps—whatever that is."

Johnny said flatly, "Sorry, but you'd just be in the way at either place."

Mohammed Mohmoud was shrugging. "Why not let her come with me? I can guarantee her protection. I have brought fifty men with me, more than a match for a few bedouin."

"Gracious," she said. "Evidently I was unaware of the magnitude of this matter. I absolutely *must* go."

Johnny said, "No."

She looked at him appraisingly. "Mr. McCord," she said, "I am here for a story. Has it occurred to you that preventing a *Paris Match* reporter from seeing your methods of operation is probably a bigger story than anything else I could find here?" She struck a mock pose. "I can see the headlines. *Sahara Reforestation Authorities Prevent Journalists from Observing Operations.*"

"Oh, Good Lord," Johnny growled. "This should happen to me, yet! Go on with Derek and the captain, if you wish."

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Pierre Marimbert and Johnny McCord took one of the faster helicopters, Pierre piloting. With French élan he immediately raised the craft a few feet and then like a nervous horse it backed up, wheeled about and dashed forward in full flight.

Spread below them were the several dozen buildings which comprised Bidon Cinq; surrounding the buildings, the acres of palm and pine, eucalyptus and black locust. Quick-growing, dry-climate trees predominated, but there were even such as balsam fir, chestnut and elm. It made an attractive sight from the air.

The reforestation projects based on Bidon Cinq were not all in the immediate vicinity of the home oasis. By air, In Ziza was almost 125 kilometers to the northeast. By far the greater part of the land lying in between was still lacking in vegetation of any sort. The hydro-geological engineers who had originally surveyed the area for water had selected only the best sections for immediate sinking of wells, placement of solar power pumps, and eventually the importation of two-year seedlings and three- and four-year-old transplants. The heavy auto-planters, brought in by air transport, had ground their way across the desert sands in their hundreds, six feet between machines. Stop, dig the hole, set the seedling, splash in water, artfully tamp down the soil, move on another six feet, stop—and begin the operation all over again. Fifty trees an hour, per machine.

In less than two months, the planters had moved on to a new base further north. The mob of scientists, engineers, water and forest technicians, mechanics and laborers melted away, leaving Johnny McCord, his two assistants, his half dozen punch-card machines, his automated equipment and his forty or fifty native workers. It was one of a hundred such centers. It would eventually be one of thousands. The Sahara covered an area almost the size of Europe.

Johnny McCord growled, "Friend Mohammed seems quite taken with our reporter."

Pierre grinned and tried to imitate a New England twang. "Why not, Hiram? She's the first, eh, women folks seen in these parts for many a day." He looked down at the endless stretches of sand dunes, gravel and rock out-croppings. "Mighty dry farm land you've got around here, Hiram."

Johnny McCord grunted. "Derek said the other day it's so dry even the mirages are only mud holes." He pointed with his forefinger. "There's the first of our trees. Now, what pumps did you check?"

Pierre directed the copter lower, skimmed not much higher than the young tree tops. Some of them had already reached an impressive height. But Johnny McCord realized that the time was not too distant when they'd have to replant. Casualties were considerably higher than in forest planting at home. Considerably so. And replanting wasn't nearly so highly automated as the original work. More manpower was required.

"These pumps here seem all right," he said to Pierre.

"A little further north," Pierre said. "I came in over the track there, from the road that comes off the main route to Poste Weygand. Yes, there we are. Look! Completely destroyed."

Johnny swore. The trees that had depended on that particular pump wouldn't last a month, in spite of the fact that they were among the first set in this area.

He said, "Go higher. We should be able to spot the complete damage with glasses. You saw twenty-two, you say?"

"Yes, I don't know how many more there might be."

There were twenty-five destroyed pumps in all. And all of them were practically together.

It was sheer luck that Pierre Marimbert had located them so soon. Had his routine check taken place in some other section of the vast tree development, he would have found nothing untoward.

"This isn't nearly so bad as I had expected," Johnny growled. He was scowling thoughtfully.

"What's the matter?" Pierre said.

"I just don't get it," Johnny said. "Number one, nomads don't carry dynamite, unless it's been deliberately given them. Two, if it was given them by someone with a purpose, why only enough to blow twenty-five pumps? That isn't a drop in the bucket. A few thousand trees are all we'll lose. Three, where did they come from? Where are their tracks? And where have they gone? This job wasn't done so very long ago, probably within a week or two at most."

"How do you know that?"

"Otherwise those trees affected would already be dying. At their age, they couldn't stand the sun long without water."

Pierre said, his face registering disbelief, "Do you think it could be simple vandalism on the part of a small band of Tuareg?"

"Sure, if the pumps had been destroyed by hand. But with explosives? Even if your band of Tuareg did have explosives they wouldn't waste them on a few Sahara Reforestation Commission pumps."

"This whole thing just doesn't make sense," Pierre Marimbert decided.

"Let's land and take a look at one of those pumps," Johnny said. "You know, if you get the whole crew to work on this you might be able to replace them before we lose any of these transplants. It's all according to how long ago they were destroyed."

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#### IV

Back at Bidon Cinq again that afternoon, Johnny McCord was greeted by the native office assistant he'd left in charge while all three of the officers were gone. Mellor, at the Tissalit base, had made several attempts to get in touch with him.

"Mellor!" Pierre grunted. "How do you Americans say it? Stuffed shirt!"

"Yeah," Johnny McCord said, sitting down to the telephone. "But my boss."

While Pierre was fishing two cans of beer from the refrigerator, Johnny dialed Tissalit. Kate's face lit up the screen. Johnny said, "Hi. I understand the old man wants to talk to me."

"That's right," the girl said, and moved a switch. "Just a minute, Johnny."

Her face faded to be replaced by that of Mellor. Johnny noted that as usual the other wore a business suit, complete with white shirt and tie—in the middle of the Sahara!

Mellor was scowling. "Where've you been, McCord?"

"Checking some pumps near In Ziza," Johnny said evenly.

"Leaving no one at all at camp?" the other said.

Johnny said, "There were at least a score of men here, Mr. Mellor."

"No officers. Suppose an emergency came up?"

Johnny felt like saying, *An emergency did come up, two of them in fact. That's why we were all gone at once.* But for some reason he decided against explaining current happenings at Bidon Cinq until he had a clearer picture. He said, "There are only three of us here, Mr. Mellor. We have to stretch our manpower. Derek Mason had to go over to Amérene el Kasbach with Mohammed Mohmoud and his men to clear out those nomads and their livestock."

"What did they find? Where were the Tuareg from?"

"They haven't returned yet." Automatically, Johnny took up his can of beer and took a swallow

from it.

Mellor's eyebrows went up. "Drinking this early in the day, McCord?"

Johnny sighed deeply, "Look, Mr. Mellor, Pierre Marimbart and I just returned from several hours in the desert, inspecting pumps. We're dehydrated, so we're drinking cold beer. It tastes wonderful. I doubt if it will lead either of us to a drunkard's grave."

Mellor scowled pompously. He said finally, "See here, McCord—the reason I called—you can be expecting a reporter from one of the French publications—"

"She's here."

"Oh," Mellor said. "I just received notice this morning. Orders are to give her the utmost cooperation. Things are on the touchy side right now. Very touchy."

"How do you mean?" Johnny said.

"There are pressures on the highest levels," Mellor said, managing to put over the impression that these matters were above and beyond such as Johnny McCord but that he, Mellor, was privy to them.

"What pressures?" Johnny said wearily. "If you want me to handle this woman with kid gloves, then I've got to know what I'm protecting her against, or hiding from her, or whatever the hell I'm supposed to do."

Mellor glared at him. "I'm not sure I always appreciate your flippancy, McCord," he said. "However, back home the opposition is in an uproar over our expenditures. Things are very delicate. A handful of votes could sway the continuance of the whole project."

Johnny McCord closed his eyes in pain. This came up every year or so.

Mellor said, "That isn't all. The Russkies are putting up a howl in the Reunited Nations. They claim the West plans to eventually take over all northwest Africa. That this reforestation is just preliminary to make the area worth assimilating."

Johnny chuckled sourly, "Let's face it. They're right."

Mellor was shocked. "Mr. McCord! The West has never admitted to any such scheme."

Johnny sighed. "However, we aren't plowing billions into the Sahara out of kindness of heart. The Mali Federation alone has almost two million square miles in it, and less than twenty million population. Already, there's fewer people than are needed to exploit the new lands we've opened up."

"Well, that brings up another point," Mellor said. "The Southeast Asia Bloc is putting up a howl too. They claim they should be the ones allowed to reclaim this area and that it should go into farmland instead of forest."

"They're putting the cart before the horse," Johnny said. "At this stage of the game, the only land they could use really profitably for farming would be along the Niger. We're going to have to forest this whole area first, and in doing so, change the whole climate. *Then* it'll...."

Mellor interrupted him. "I'm as familiar with the program of the Sahara Reforestation Commission as you are, I am sure, McCord. I need no lecture. See that Miss Desage gets as sympathetic a picture of our work as possible. And, for heaven's sake, don't let anything happen that might influence her toward writing something that would change opinions either at home or in the Reunited Nations."

"I'll do my best," Johnny said sourly.

The other clicked off.

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Pierre was handy with another can of beer, already opened. "So Mademoiselle Desage is to be handled with loving care."

Johnny groaned, "And from what we've seen so far of Mademoiselle Desage, she's going to take quite a bit of loving care to handle."

Outside, they could hear the beating of rotors coming in. Two helicopters, from the sound of it. Beer cans in hand they went over to the window and watched them approach.

"Derek and the girl in one, Mohammed in the other," Pierre said. "Evidently our good captain left the messy work of butchering goats to his men, while he remains on the scene to be as available to our girl Hélène as she will allow."

The copters swooped in, landed, the rotors came to a halt and the occupants stepped from the cockpits. The Arab ground crew came running up to take over.

Preceded by Hélène Desage, the two men made their way toward the main office. Even at this distance there seemed to be an aggressive lift to the girl's walk.

"Oh, oh, my friend," Pierre said. "I am afraid Mademoiselle Desage is unhappy about something."

Johnny groaned. "I think you're right. But smile, Reuben, smile. You heard the city slicker's orders. Handle her with all the care of a new-born heifer."

Hélène Desage stormed through the door and glared at Johnny McCord. "Do you realize what your men are doing?"

"I thought I did," Johnny said placatingly.

Derek and Mohammed Mohmoud entered behind her. Derek winked at Johnny McCord and made a beeline for the refrigerator. "Beer, everybody?" he said.

Mohammed Mohmoud said, "A soft drink for me, if you please, Mr. Mason."

Derek said, "Sorry, I forgot. Beer, Miss Desage?"

She turned and glared at him. "You did nothing whatsoever to prevent them!"

Derek shrugged. "That's why we went out there, honey. Did you notice how much damage those goats had done to the trees? Thousands of dollars worth."

Johnny said wearily, "What happened?" He sank into the chair behind his desk.

The reporter turned to him again. "Your men are shooting the livestock of those poverty-stricken people."

Mohammed Mohmoud said, "We are keeping an accurate count of every beast destroyed, Mr. McCord." His dark face was expressionless.

Johnny McCord attempted to explain to the girl. "As I told you, Miss Desage, goats are the curse of the desert. They prefer leaves, twigs and even the bark of young trees to grass. The Commission before ever taking on this tremendous project arranged through the Mali Federation government to buy up and have destroyed every grazing animal north of the Niger. It cost millions upon millions. But our work couldn't even begin until it was accomplished."

"But why slaughter the livelihood of those poor people? You could quite easily insist that they return with their flocks to whatever areas are still available to them."

Derek offered her a can of beer. She seemed to be going to reject it, but a desert-born thirst changed her mind. She took it without thanking him.

The lanky Canadian said mildly, "I tried to explain to her that the Tuareg aren't exactly innocent children of the desert. They're known as the Apaches of the Sahara. For a couple of thousand years they've terrified the other nomads. They were slave raiders, bandits. When the Commission started its work the other tribes were glad to sell their animals and take up jobs in the new oases. Send their kids to the new schools we've been building in the towns. Begin fitting into the reality of modern life."

Her eyes were flashing now. "The Apaches of the Sahara, eh? *Bien sur!* If I remember correctly, the American Apaches were the last of the Indian tribes which you Americans destroyed. The last to resist. Now you export your methods to Africa!"

Johnny McCord said mildly, "Miss Desage, it seems to be the thing these days to bleed over the fate of the redman. Actually, there are a greater number of them in the United States today than there were when Columbus landed. But even if you do carry a torch for the noble Indian, picking the Apaches as an example is poor choice. They were bandit tribes, largely living off what they could steal and raid from the Pueblo and other harder working but less warlike Indians. The Tuareg are the North African equivalent."

"Who are you to judge?" she snapped back. "Those tribesmen out there are the last defenders of their ancient desert culture. Their flocks are their way of life. You mercilessly butcher them, rob their women and children of their sole source of food and clothing."

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Johnny McCord ran his hand over his face in an unhappy gesture. "Look," he said plaintively. "Those goats and sheep have already been bought and paid for by the Commission. The Tuareg should have destroyed them, or sold them as food to be immediately butchered, several years ago. Where they've been hiding is a mystery. But they simply have no right to be in possession of those animals, no right to be in this part of the country, and, above all, no right to be grazing in our transplants."

"It's their country! What right have you to order them away?"

Johnny McCord held up his hands, palms upward. "This country is part of the Mali Federation, Miss Desage. It used to be called French Sudan and South Algeria. The government of the Federation gladly accepted the project of reforestating the Sahara. Why not? We've already succeeded in making one of the most poverty-stricken areas in the world a prosperous one. Far from there being unemployment here, we have a labor shortage. Schools have opened, even universities. Hospitals have sprung up. Highways have been laid out through country that hadn't even trails before. The Federation is booming. If there are a few Tuareg who can't adapt to the new world, it's too bad. Their children will be glad for the change."

She seated herself stiffly. "I am not impressed by your excuses," she said.

Johnny shrugged and turned to Mohammed Mohmoud who had been standing silently through all this, almost as though at attention.

Johnny said, "Did you learn where this band comes from? Where they had kept that many animals for so long without detection?"

The Moslem officer shook his head. "They wouldn't reveal that."

Johnny looked at Derek Mason. The Canadian shook his head. "None of them spoke French, Johnny. Or if they did, they wouldn't admit it. When we first came up they looked as though they were going to fight. Happily, the size of the captain's command made them decide otherwise. At any rate, they're putting up no resistance. I let them know through the captain, here, that when they got back to Tissalit, or Timbuktu, they could put in a demand for reimbursement for their animals—if the animals were legally theirs."

Johnny looked at the Malian officer again. "How come you've returned to camp? Shouldn't you be out there with your men?"

"There were a few things to be discussed," the Moslem said. He looked significantly at the French reporter.

Hélène Desage said, "Let me warn you, I will not tolerate being sent away. I want to hear this. If I don't, I demand you let me communicate immediately with my magazine and with the Transatlantic Newspaper Alliance for whom I am also doing a series of articles on the Sahara Reforestation *scheme*."

Johnny McCord winced. He said, "There is nothing going on around here, Miss Desage, that is secret. You won't be ordered away." He turned to Mohammed Mohmoud. "What did you wish to discuss, Captain?"

"First, what about the camels, asses and horses?"

"Shoot them. Practically the only graze between here and Tissalit are our trees."

"And how will they get themselves and their property out of this country?" the reporter snapped.

Johnny said wearily, "We'll truck them out, Miss Desage. They and all their property. And while we're doing it, we'll feed them. I imagine, before it's all over it will cost the Commission several thousand dollars." He turned back to the desert patrol captain. "What else?"

From a tunic pocket Mohammed Mohmoud brought a handgun and handed it to Johnny McCord. "I thought you might like to see this. They were quite well armed. At first I thought there might be resistance."

Johnny turned the automatic over in his hands, scowling at it. "What's there to see that's special? I don't know much about guns."

Mohammed Mohmoud said, "It was made in Pilsen."

Johnny looked up at him. "Czechoslovakia, eh?"

The other said, "So were most of their rifles."

Hélène Desage snorted in deprecation. "So, we'll drag in that old wheeze. The red menace. Blame it on *la Russie*."

Johnny McCord said mildly, "We haven't blamed anything on the Russkies, Miss Desage. The Tuareg have a right to bear arms, there are still dangerous animals in the Mali Federation. And they are free to purchase Czech weapons if they find them better or cheaper than western ones. Don't find an exciting story where there is none. Things are tranquil here."

Hélène Desage stared at him. So did Mohammed Mohmoud and Derek Mason for that matter.

Only Pierre Marimbert realized Johnny McCord's position, and he chuckled and went for more beer.

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## V

Johnny McCord was a man who didn't like to be thrown out of routine. He resented the interference with his schedule of the past few days. By nature he was methodical, not given to inspiration.

All of which was probably the reason that he spent a sleepless night trying to find rhyme and reason where seemingly there was none.

At dawn, he stepped from the door of his Quonset hut quarters and looked for a moment into the gigantic red ball which was the Saharan sun. Neither dawn nor sunset at Bidon Cinq were spectacular, nor would they become so until the Sahara Reforestation Commission began to return moisture to desert skies. Johnny wondered if he would live to see it.

He made his way over to the huge steel shed which doubled as garage and aircraft hanger. As yet, none of the native mechanics were stirring, although he could hear sounds of activity in the community kitchen.

Derek Mason looked up from his inspection of Hélène Desage's air-cushion Land Rover.

Johnny McCord scowled at him. "What in the hell are you doing here?"

The lanky Canadian came erect and looked for a long moment at his superior. He said finally, soberly, "It occurs to me that I'm probably doing the same thing you came to do."

"What have you found?"

"That a small bomb has been attached to the starter."

Johnny didn't change expression. It fitted in. "What else?" he said.

Derek handed him a steel ring.

Johnny McCord looked at it, recognized it for what it was and stuck it in his pocket. "Let's go back to the office. Yell in to the cook to send some coffee over, and call Pierre. We've got some notes to check."

Mademoiselle Desage was a late riser. When she entered the office, the three Sahara Reforestation Commission officers were already at work.

She said snappishly to Johnny McCord, "Today I would like to see these destroyed pumps."

Johnny said, his eyebrows questioning, "How did you know they were destroyed?"

"It doesn't seem to be much of a secret. The story is all about the camp."

"Oh?" Johnny sighed, then drawled to Derek, "I say, Si, you better go get the hired hand, we might as well finish this up so we can get back to work."

Derek nodded and left.

Johnny McCord left the collator he'd been working with, went around behind his desk and sat down. "Take a chair, Miss Desage. I want to say a few things in the way of background to you."

She sat, but said defiantly, "I have no need of a lengthy lecture on the glories of the Sahara Reforestation Commission."

"Coffee?" Pierre Marimbert said politely.

"No, thank you."

Johnny said, his voice thoughtful, "I imagine the real starting point was back about 1957 when the Chinese discovered that a nation's greatest natural resource is its manpower."

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She frowned at him. "What in the world are you talking about?"

He ignored her and went on. "Originally, appalled by the job of feeding over half a billion mouths, they had initiated a birth control plan. But after a year or two they saw it was the wrong approach. They were going to succeed, if they succeeded, in their *Great Leaps Forward* by utilizing the labor of every man, woman and child in the country. And that's what they proceeded to do. The lesson was brought home to the rest of the world in less than ten years, when such other countries as India and Indonesia failed to do the same."

Johnny leaned back in his chair, and his eyes were thoughtful but unseeing. "Even we of the west learned the lesson. The most important factor in our leadership was our wonderful trained labor force. As far back as 1960 we had more than 65 million Americans working daily in industry and distribution. Even the Russkies, with their larger population, didn't begin to equal that number."

"What are you driveling about?" the reporter demanded.

"To sum it up," Johnny said mildly, "the battle for men's minds continues and each of the world's great powers has discovered that it can't afford to limit its population—its greatest resource. So population continues to explode and the world is currently frantically seeking sources of food for its new billions. The Amazon basin is being made into a tropical garden; the Japanese, landless, are devising a hundred methods of farming the sea; Australia is debouching into its long unpopulated interior, doing much the same things we are here in the Sahara. The Chinese are over-flowing into Sinkiang, Mongolia and Tibet; the Russkies into Siberia. We of the west, with the large underdeveloped areas of the western hemisphere have not been so greatly pushed as some others. However, there is always tomorrow."

Derek entered with Captain Mohammed Mohmoud. The latter day Rudolph Valentino had a puzzled expression on his dark face.

"Here's the hired man, Hiram," Derek drawled.

The desert patrol officer nodded questioningly to the men and said, "*Bonjour*," to Hélène Desage.

Johnny went on. "Yes, there's tomorrow. And by the time we run out of *Lebensraum* in Brazil and Alaska, in Central America and the Argentine, in Texas and Saskatchewan, we're going to need the three million square miles of the Sahara."

She said in ridicule, "It will take you a century at least to reforest the desert."

"At least." Johnny nodded agreeably. "And we're willing and able to look that far ahead. Possibly by that time our opponents will also be looking for new lands for their expanding peoples. And where will they find them? The advantage will be ours, Miss Desage."

Mohammed Mohmoud looked from one to the other, frowning. "What are we discussing?" he said. "I should be getting back to my men."

Derek yawned and said, "Forget about it, pal. You're never going to be getting back to your men again."

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The desert patrol officer's eyes widened. He turned his glare on Johnny McCord, "What is all this?"

Johnny said, "I'll tell it, Derek."

Hélène Desage was as surprised as the Malian. "What is going on? Are you trying to whitewash yourselves by casting blame on this gentleman?"

"Let me go on," Johnny said. "Needless to say, there are conflicting interests. The Soviet Complex obviously would as soon we didn't succeed. However, wars are impractical today, and the Russkies and Chinese are taken up with their own development. The Southeast Asia bloc wouldn't mind taking over here themselves, they desperately need land already. But they aren't our biggest opponents. There's another group even more involved—the *colons* of Algeria and Morocco and those of even such Mali cities as Dakar. I suppose it is this last element that you represent, Miss Desage."

She was staring unbelievably at him now.

"Their interest is to get the Sahara Reforestation Commission out of the way so that they can immediately exploit the area. They are interested in the *now*, not the potentialities of the future. They resent the use of the Niger for reforestation, when they could use it for immediate irrigation projects. They would devote the full resources of the Mali Federation and Algeria to seeking oil and minerals and in the various other ways the country might be exploited. Finally, they rather hate to see the western schools, hospitals, and other means used to raise the local living standards. They liked the low wage rates that formerly applied."

Johnny nodded. "Yes, I imagine that's your angle."

Hélène Desage stormed to her feet. "I don't have to listen to this!"

Derek said, "Honey, we sure aren't holding you. You're free to go any time you want. And you can take this pal of yours along with you." He jerked his head contemptuously at Mohammed Mohmoud.

Pierre Marimbert said, "Mademoiselle, we have no idea of where you two met originally, nor how close your relationship, but the captain should have remembered that I too am French. A gentleman, on first meeting a lady, would never, never address her as *tu in our language*."

Johnny sighed again and looked at his watch. "Other things pile up too, Miss Desage. You let slip a few moments ago that you knew about the pumps being destroyed. You said the rumor was all around camp. But it couldn't be. The only persons who knew about it were myself, Pierre and Derek. On top of that, there were no signs of bedouin or animals near the exploded pumps; the person who did the job must have come in an aircraft or air-cushion car. And, besides, we found the pin of a hand grenade in your land rover this morning. We had thought at first that dynamite had been used, but evidently you smuggled your much more compact bombs across the desert with you. Obviously, no one would have dreamed of searching your vehicle.

"No, Miss Desage, it's obvious that you detoured from the track on the way down from Poste Weygand, went over to In Ziza, a comparatively short distance, and blew up twenty-five of our pumps."

Johnny turned to the Malian officer now. "At the same time you were coordinating with her, you and whatever gang is hiring you. Someone supplied those Tuareg with the livestock and paid them to trek up here. You, of course, turned your back and let them through. The same someone who supplied the livestock also supplied Czech weapons."

Hélène Desage was still sputtering indignation. "Ridiculous! Why? What would motivate me to such nonsense?"

Johnny grimaced. "The whole thing makes a beautiful story at a time when the American government is debating the practicality of the whole project. You could do quite a sob story on the poor, poverty-stricken Tuareg having their livestock destroyed. Then, quite a tale about the bedouin raiding our pumping stations and blowing them up. And quite a tale about the Tuareg being armed with Czech weapons. Oh, I imagine before it was through you'd have drawn a picture of civil war going on here between the nomads and the Commission. Blowing up your own car with a small bomb attached to the starter was just one more item. By the way, were you going to do it yourself? Or did you intend to allow one of our mechanics to kill himself?"

She flushed. "Don't be ridiculous. No one would have been hurt. The bomb is a very small one. More smoke and flash than anything else."

"Well, thanks for small favors," Derek said sarcastically.

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She gave up. "Very well," she snapped. "There is nothing you can do. This whole project, as I said before, is nothing but American boon-doggling, a way of plowing endless resources into a hole. Your real motivation is an attempt to prevent depression and unemployment in your country."

Pierre Marimbert said softly, "So you admit to this whole scheme to discredit us?"

"Why not?" She turned to the door. "I will still write my articles. It's my word or yours."

Derek grinned at her. "I think I could fall in love with you, honey," he said. "Life would provide few dull moments. However, you didn't notice how nice and automated this office is. Card



machines, electric typewriters, all the latest—including tape recorders for office conversations. You talked too much, honey."

"*Cochon!*" she shrieked at him. She whirled and was through the door.

Johnny turned to Mohammed Mohmoud. "I guess the best thing for you would be to turn in your commission, Captain."

Dark eyes snapped. "And if I say no?"

Johnny shook his head. "The Mali Federation passed some awfully strict laws when it was drawing up its constitution. Among them was one involving capital punishment for anyone destroying a source of water in the desert. Miss Desage did the actual work but you were hand in glove with her. I'd hate to have to report that to your superiors."

Derek jumped forward quickly. His hand snaked out and chopped the other's forearm. The heavy military pistol fell to the floor, and the Canadian kicked it to one side. "Shucks," he drawled, "the hired hand sure is tricky, ain't he?"

"Good Lord," Johnny McCord said disgustedly, "I didn't say I was going to report you. Just threatened to if you didn't resign. Now get out of here, we've got work to do. I'm three days behind on my reports!"

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