

The Diplomat

*James
Aldridge*

THE DIPLOMAT

By the same author

SIGNED WITH THEIR HONOUR

THE SEA EAGLE

OF MANY MEN

THE HUNTER

THE DIPLOMAT

James A. Marjorie



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Author's Note

In *The Diplomat* I have made the spelling of Iranian names and places correspond as closely as possible to the pronunciation. In some cases I have deliberately simplified Persian names; also, I have had to adulterate some Persian words to avoid any possible naming of real places and people.

J. A.

Book One

Lord Essex

LORD ESSEX SAT in the Douglas aeroplane and smoked his pipe and waited for another conveyance to come and take him away. The plane had forced-landed in the darkness after running into a snow-storm which had frozen its controls. It rested now on its belly in a bleak white Russian field, washed quietly by the snow and the wind. Looking out of the small window at the snowing darkness, Lord Essex was sorry that he was not a younger man so that he could have gone with MacGregor and the Russian crew to look for a farmhouse and some transport.

At fifty-eight Essex was too old to be anything but the man left behind, even though he looked ten years younger. Essex was deliberately healthy and strongly opposed to growing old. His face was pink and calm and adult; he had confident eyes and a solid noble broken nose. As he leaned on his elbows in the cushioned seat he was relaxed and even sleepy and he showed no reaction to the dangerous landing they had just made. He was more concerned about the snoring of the Russian passenger behind him, and by the fact that his arrival in Moscow would be one day delayed. One day's delay could be unfortunate on a mission that had to be done with as quickly as possible. Apart from that he was glad of this interruption. He was one of those gifted men to whom adventure always happens. He could always expect something like a forced landing to come along at the right time and give him romance. The more that happened to Essex at fifty-eight the more he liked it, so long as it did not destroy him. The pity of it was that he could not go with MacGregor across that dark wash of snow.

MacGregor had gone off with the Russians without asking Essex's permission. Though he had never seen MacGregor before meeting him on the London airfield, Essex felt that the young man might have asked his permission before going. MacGregor was his chosen assistant on this mission and MacGregor owed him the courtesy of some deference. MacGregor had not been impolite, but he was unusually independent and brainy-looking for an India Office expert.

Essex had undertaken this mission at a few hours' notice and he had chosen MacGregor on paper as the best man he could get on Iranian affairs. Since leaving London Essex had not succeeded in thawing him out. Even the forced landing had not broken MacGregor's restraint, and he had behaved in the worst moment of the crash as unnervously as Essex himself. Nevertheless, in their short and broken conversations Essex had already detected a slight and unexplainable reluctance in MacGregor, a careful withdrawal or a discontent. Essex did not like it. On a mission like this he had to have the quick co-operation of his assistant; success or failure could depend upon it. It was time that he took MacGregor in hand, because MacGregor would have to be straightened out by the time they reached Moscow.

The Russian behind Essex snored again and Essex leaned back and touched the man to stop it. Then he bundled-up in his fur-lined coat and tried to sleep with his mind upon the first meeting with Molotov. He would make sly jokes with Molotov about their forced landing in a Russian plane. They would be English jokes which Molotov might not fully appreciate. No doubt Molotov would smile with his flat face and think up a reply which would come rattling off his sharp tongue. It would be something clever, humorous enough, but political because the Russians behaved that way even in their humour. They were always half serious and half proud, and always politically single-minded.

When Essex awakened, MacGregor was sitting beside him. They were alone in the plane. 'Well MacGregor,' Essex said. 'Any luck at all? Did you find a village?'

'We found a farmhouse,' MacGregor said. 'Apparently there is a village across the far north end of this field. The pilot is bringing a sled, and we can ride in.'

'How about transport to Moscow?'

'We'll have to do what we can at the village. One of the crew has gone to a Red Army camp somewhere about, and with a little luck we may get a car.' MacGregor spoke with this care which Essex did not like.

'How far are we from Moscow?' Essex asked him.

'About forty miles.'

'What about that sled to take us to the village?' Essex would have to ask the questions because MacGregor would not volunteer much information.

'It will be here any minute.'

'Well that's something,' Essex grunted.

MacGregor added nothing and they sat quietly in the cold plane. Essex lit his pipe again, and MacGregor sat still as if he did not want to disturb Essex or remind Essex of his presence, but Lord Essex stretched again with calm laziness.

'I suppose we will miss Molotov to-morrow,' he said to MacGregor. 'Yes.'

'Of course no definite meeting had been arranged with him but I was counting on seeing him to-morrow so that we could start quickly.'

MacGregor listened with dull silence.

'Are you all set to go to work?' Essex asked him.

'I am not sure,' MacGregor said. 'I was just given a bundle of documents and a very brief outline by Sir Rowland Smith. I don't even know the agenda.'

'There isn't any agenda,' Essex said. 'The Russians don't want to talk, they don't want to make anything definite, so we will have to work things out as we go along. I hope to God you know your Azerbaijan, MacGregor, because these Russians have to be met with plenty of details. You have been working in London on northern Iran for some time haven't you?'

'Six or seven months.'

'How long did you live in Iran?'

'Most of my life.'

'Good: Then you know what we're up against there and you will understand the job we have to do in Moscow. All I have is a bare instruction telling me little more than to get the Russians out of Azerbaijan and restore the Teheran Government's authority. Not much to work on is it?'

'I don't suppose it is.'

'It's a tall order for us, MacGregor,' Essex said, 'because the Foreign Minister failed to shift the Russians at the Moscow Conference barely a week ago. So we are beginning with something of a lost cause. I think we can pull it off if we keep right up to the mark. We're not very well prepared but we know what we want, that is the main thing. What sort of material did Rowland Smith give you?'

'Mostly document prepared for the Moscow Conference.'

'What's it like?'

'I haven't read it all.' MacGregor was a calm fellow alright.

'I don't place much store in a lot of documents so don't worry too much about it. I'll be better satisfied if you know your subject. One man who knows his area is a damn sight better than a trunk load of

documents. I don't understand why they didn't take you to the Moscow Conference in the first place.'

'Sir Rowland went himself,' MacGregor said.

'I know that, but he could hardly have your knowledge of the country.' It did not sound at all like flattery. Essex smiled. 'How do you feel about getting in on this trip MacGregor?'

'I don't mind,' MacGregor said in a friendly way.

'You don't mind!'

'No. But how long will we be in Moscow?' It seemed to be the first question that MacGregor had asked Essex since they had left London.

'Good heavens I don't know,' Essex said. 'Do you have something more important to do?'

MacGregor did not reply and Essex guessed that MacGregor was blushing. He should blush, but Essex was sorry that he had caught MacGregor like that and he laughed a little and cracked MacGregor on the knee.

'We won't be long,' Essex said.

'I wanted to catch someone in London, that was all.' MacGregor was embarrassed, and this pleased Essex all the more and he did not let this go.

'When?' Essex asked.

'In about two weeks I think.'

'Oh we should be back by then,' Essex said. 'If we're not you can probably telephone whoever it is from Moscow. I think the 'phone is going again. Is it important?'

'It might be,' MacGregor had no choice but to explain. 'It's a fellow who is coming from Iran as a matter of fact, and I want to see him about going back there. Back to my job.'

'Oh?' Essex lit a match and almost looked at MacGregor's face with it as he lit his pipe. 'I remember reading something about it in your file. Geologist weren't you, or something like that with the English-Per-sian oil people? In Iran was it?'

'Something like that,' MacGregor said.

'What exactly were you?'

'A Micro-paleontologist.'

'What the devil is that?'

'A paleontologist, but specializing in microscopic fossils.'

'I thought you had been a geologist.'

'It's part of geology.'

'Little more academic eh?'

'In a way.'

'And you intend going back to it?'

'If I can.'

'You don't intend staying in the India Office at all?'

'No,' MacGregor said. 'I was more or less drafted into it.'

'You seem to be turning down a golden opportunity in leaving the India Office, MacGregor. This particular job you are on will be quite a start for you. What on earth do you want to go back to geology or paleontology for?'

'It's my work,' MacGregor said carefully.

'How long have you been away from it?'

'All the war. About six years.'

'Then I don't suppose it will be easy for you to go back to it.'

'No. It will be quite difficult.'

'Oh well. Every man to his own field. But haven't eight months in the India Office convinced you there is more in diplomacy than in geology?'

'I don't know much about diplomacy.' MacGregor had thawed a little. 'I was surprised when I was told that I was going with you.'

'I picked you myself my boy.'

'I had wondered why.' MacGregor hesitated over it.

'Ah, I pick my men for being men MacGregor, not for being good civil servants. I like young men, and thirty is a good age for you to begin. You had lived in the country of course and knew the languages, and that pretty well decided me, but I thought you had quite a few extra qualifications. New man in the field, good war record: Military Cross eh?'

'Yessir.' It was the last military trace of the man.

'A good war record is a good background to have, particularly in this business.' Essex knew what he was talking about because he had a good war record himself: not only a Military Cross but a Distinguished Service Order. Apart from that he looked upon war as a necessary experience, and he had never been sorry for his own experience. He had been in France within the first year of the First War's beginning, and within another year he had been a Captain in the family regiment, the Household Cavalry, and in charge of five hundred yards of line on the Somme. Actually, when he wanted to be honest with himself, Essex admitted that he had not liked the Western Front, and though he had fully enjoyed the liberality of Paris on his rare leaves, he had been very glad to get out of it and move over the Middle East. He had found in Cairo

what he had hoped to find in every other city in the world: leisure, importance, ease, warmth, and wealth; as well as a few moments of really great experience. As a Major and a Staff Officer he had spent some of his time along the Red Sea with Standish and Lawrence, men he had recognized immediately as historic figures. For that alone the war had been worth while. He must remember to tell MacGregor about it, because it did these young fellows good to see that their experience in this war was not exclusive, particularly for a fellow like MacGregor whose record showed that he had spent a considerable amount of time in the Long Range Desert Group, which to Essex was the only unit in this war to resemble Lawrence's exceptional men. That had been another reason for choosing MacGregor, but Essex didn't mention it. Instead he told MacGregor that his knowledge of Russian had been a factor in his selection.

'I wouldn't count on my Russian,' MacGregor said.

'I never count on anything,' Essex told him. 'Anyway: how did you get into the India Office? Did Rowland Smith acquire you?'

'I don't know. They just lifted me out of the Army and discharged me on the condition that I went into the India Office for a while. They won't let me get out of it now.'

'Well you will just have to put up with this for a few weeks more, MacGregor. I am going to need all the assistance you can give me.'

'I don't know much about this work,' MacGregor said again.

'And I gather that you are not particularly interested?'

Essex could see that MacGregor did not want to answer that.

'Yes, I'm interested,' MacGregor said and got up and stamped his feet on the cold metal floor of the plane and walked up and down away from Essex. Essex got up when someone banged on the metal door from the outside. MacGregor opened it and the snow blew in and Essex could hear the two Russian passengers. He watched them get into the plane and throw their bundles into a rough sled which had been backed up to the door. The pilot had climbed into the plane against the luggage, and he laughed and said something to MacGregor in Russian and did not wait for MacGregor's reply but went up to the cockpit.

'You can ride,' MacGregor said, and jumped down.

Essex told him to move aside as he leapt down into the slush. 'I can walk,' he said.

'The snow is deep and wet,' MacGregor did not know yet that he was saying the wrong thing to this old-young man.

'I prefer to walk,' Essex told him.

The peasant pulled and kicked his horses. The sled jerked forward, and led Essex blindly in the darkness across a rising field through the timber and over the snowbanks. It was too much for MacGregor to watch Essex walking, and he got off the sled and walked the rest of the way to the village with him.

The village was small, a few wooden huts in the surrounding snow, primitive and black, even in the night. The sled stopped at one of the low huts which showed a yellow light in its small window, and Essex followed MacGregor into the dim room. Essex saw a tiled stove in the middle of the rough floor and he walked forward with his hands outstretched and said to MacGregor, 'What the devil is this place?'

'The post office,' MacGregor told him.

It was a dark and warm but dingy hut, with one golden corner of light. This came from a small floating wick in an open cigarette tin of oil standing on an old timbered counter. A round stocky peasant girl leaned on the counter near the light, her hand at her chin and her lips pouted. A small Russian soldier with crossed legs leaned on the side of the counter playing a thirteen-string guitar. These two watched the strangers uninterestedly, as the luggage was brought in and blankets were spread out and their stove surrounded. The soldier went on singing lightly as the pilot of the plane faced the girl and shook the snow off his leather coat and turned the handle of the phone which was hanging precariously on the wall.

'It's a dingy place and damned dark,' Essex said, and sat down on one of the blankets near the stove. MacGregor stood near him for a moment taking off his trench coat to hang it on a hooked post.

'What would these people be doing in the post office at two o'clock in the morning?' he said to Essex, avoiding two other Russians asleep on mail bags around the corner of the stove.

'No home,' Essex said and watched MacGregor lean on the counter near the soldier with the guitar. Essex sat with his back to the warm tiles of the stove and he took a good look at MacGregor. It was the first time that Essex had seen him out of his crushed trench coat. Essex found it hard to single out any characteristic by which he could better identify MacGregor. He was lean, and about as tall as Essex himself. His face seemed small but very smooth and very tight. It was set with the expression of a man who did his own thinking all the time, and who kept all his thinking to himself. He had thin straight hair but it was the sort of hair that suited him. It was the sort of hair that stayed throughout a man's lifetime, a little like Essex's own, but not so well cut or groomed to fit his features. It was the only similarity

between the two men. Where Essex's nose was broken MacGregor's was thin and straight and Scotch. Where Essex's eyes were quick and humorous, MacGregor's were too controlled and patient. Their clothes were different. Essex wore a good flannel suit and MacGregor wore a shaggy herringbone cut too loose. This annoyed Essex because he liked men who had the imagination to dress well, even if they dressed untidily. MacGregor's untidy and dull clothes were something of a contradiction to his careful attitudes and his apparent independence. Essex did not like too many contradictions in his assistants, and he watched MacGregor closely to see from which direction he could charm this fellow into loyalty and co-operation and understanding. He dozed off without getting far, and MacGregor was again sitting on the floor beside him when he awakened.

'Did they phone Moscow?' Essex asked him.

'Yes,' MacGregor said. 'They eventually got through.'

'Did you talk with the Embassy?'

'No. The pilot said that the Embassy would be told about us.'

'It may not be wise to leave it to our Russian friends.'

'It will be alright if they remember at the other end,' MacGregor said.

'Perhaps we ought to insist on a car to Moscow as soon as possible.'

'A car will be here in about an hour. If the roads aren't too frozen we can probably reach Moscow by early morning.'

Essex eased down on the floor and leaned on his elbow. 'I see that fellow is still playing his guitar. Did you find out what he was doing here at this hour of the night?' He mumbled this at MacGregor as the guitarist started to sing again to the plump girl.

'He likes the post-mistress,' MacGregor said and smiled.

Essex looked up at him. 'At two o'clock in the morning?'

'Time doesn't seem to mean much here. He told me he has to start cutting timber at five o'clock in the morning—this morning.'

'Who are these other people lying about on the floor.'

'Peasants.'

Essex took off his shoes and put his stockinged feet back near the stove. He was now fully reclined upon the floor along the stove, his head on his fur-lined coat and his hands beneath his head. 'Russia hasn't changed much despite its revolution,' he said and looked at the strawlined ceiling. 'Have you been here before MacGregor?'

'No.' MacGregor leaned down on his elbow as if Essex's informality had emboldened him a little. 'Have you been here before?'

'Yes,' Essex said sleepily. 'I was here in 1905 during the first