

The Roaming Heart

An Alasdair and Toby story

By Charlie Cochrane

"Linda, my dear, you look terribly tired." Charles Prior laid his hand on the girl's arm. She did look weary, dreadfully pale and drawn.

"It's this wretched job. I can't afford to give it up, as Mama depends upon me." Linda fought back the tears, a fierce, brave look on her lovely face.

"There is another solution — we've spoken of it often."

Charles took her hand, gently caressing it. "If you would only do me the honour..." His eyes shone with hope and a desire that, this time, those expectations shouldn't prove forlorn.

"No — no, my dear. It would never work. I could never make you happy as you deserve to be." Linda patted Charles's hand, smiled at him as a sister might. "You know that my heart will always lie elsewhere."

Charles glanced out of the café window, better to observe the man who was coming, with an eager stride, down the street. "Shall I go? I wouldn't want him to be angry with you."

"No. I won't let him be rude to you as he was before. He must understand that you are as dear to me as a brother." She stood up as Ralph Allen came through the door, a huge smile lighting up her face, a smile she had never produced for Charles. "I'm so pleased you could come. You've met before, of course?" She indicated her companion.

Ralph scowled, fists clenching. "Oh yes, I remember you, Mr. Prior."

"Cut!" The director's voice rang out and everyone relaxed. "That was wonderful, my dears. All in one take as well, excellent job. We'll do the close ups this afternoon, everyone." He came across to where his stars were beginning to laugh and joke with one another. "Alasdair, you were marvellous. Your Ralph really did look as if he was going to punch Charles there and then. Toby, no-one does unrequited love like you can, dear. And Fiona, that was simply wonderful. Now, my dears, go and take a rest so that you'll sparkle again for me."

"Are you lunching with the cast and crew, Alasdair?" Fiona Marsden had eschewed the martyred persona she was displaying as Linda Sheringham and was now much more flirtatious in voice and manner.

Alasdair Hamilton shrugged. "I'll see. I have a bit of a headache coming on."

Toby Bowe grinned; he too had reassumed his naturally cheerful face. "Come on, you could do with at least a bowl of decent soup — you can't live on sandwiches forever. Or does your housekeeper produce such lavish meals that the studio canteen is beneath you?"

"I'll have you know that my housekeeper..." Alasdair didn't finish his sentence, as the assistant director appeared with a message about the last minute re-working of one of the afternoon's scenes. All three of Landseer Studio's most noteworthy stars came to the unspoken decision that they would indeed eat with the rest of the cast and crew, then made their way to the dining hall.

The Roaming Heart looked like being another success for the directorship of Alexander Rattigan and the romantic triangle of Hamilton, Bowe and Marsden. It would be brought in under budget, well in time, and the handsome faces of the leads would soon be plastered all over cinemas and billboards in every corner of the kingdom. Toby and Alasdair would no doubt be pictured on either side of Fiona, as usual, the former with the expression of a spaniel seeking a crumb from its mistress' table and the latter with the quietly confident air of the natural victor.

It was a tried and trusted formula, delivering a nice dollop of nostalgic enjoyment for an audience sick of meat still being on the ration and wars still being fought in the butcher's queue. Hamilton and Bowe had both served, both acquired distinguished enough records, although not as glowing as the studio hinted. Fiona had been a volunteer nurse at Netley — all the fulsome accounts of her service

were, surprisingly enough, true. They'd made two films together over the last year and a half — Wings of Love and Valour Undeterred — both of which had been roaring successes. In the first Toby had even got the girl, but only because Alasdair's character had been killed in a dogfight over Kent and she'd been on the rebound, swearing to her best friend that she'd make a dutiful, attentive wife even though her heart had gone down with her lover's Hurricane.

In the second Alasdair was the winner, as formula dictated he normally was, and Toby was allowed to suffer beautifully. Female filmgoers inevitably came out of the pictures in floods of tears, while male filmgoers were grateful for the opportunity to provide comfort, and for the chance of ogling Fiona Marsden.

The effect of these triumphs had been overwhelming. Already popular with film and theatre fans, these three had now become the hottest properties in British cinema; some folk even muttered vague rumours of Hollywood beckoning. The postbag of letters from fans had swollen and proposals of marriage, alongside other less respectable things, flooded in, not just to the female part of the triangle.

The gossip columns adored them, too. Hamilton and Bowe's names were linked to a succession of leading ladies, members of the nobility and, in one case, a foreign princess. There were persistent rumours that one or other of them was involved with Miss Marsden. It varied depending on the magazine or newspaper you read, each newspaper having its favourite. The devoted readers of these rags would, depending on whether their preference was for tall, slim and handsome or short, muscular and handsome, imagine themselves into the published stories with their own names linked to Hamilton or Bowe. Not all those who held these fantasies were female.

Fiona was delighted to have the world speculating about her. It was more than pleasant to find oneself caught between two such fine-looking and charming young men, to be often on their arm at some occasion or the other, particularly now that the wartime austerity was at last showing a sign or two of dissipating. And the possibility of Hollywood was a thrilling prospect. The only fly in the ointment was that these social occasions seemed to be prompted by the studio, rather than by the actors themselves and that, for all the linking of arms and dancing cheek to cheek, there was never more than a peck on the hand to end the evening with. She was beginning to suspect that the gossip columnists who espoused the secret engagement to a foreign princess theory had got it right. But at this juncture she sailed into lunch with both of them, like some proud ship of the line and her escort of frigates, earning admiring, jealous glances from the makeup girls, dressers and female extras. Fiona Marsden was a star and "she's probably snogging *both* of those two, lucky cow" were the constant watchwords behind the scenes.

"And does your housekeeper prepare anything to match this?" Toby piled into a particularly tasty fricassee, although he wasn't sure he hadn't once had ten bob at Ascot on the animal he was eating. "She does indeed; perhaps you should come and try it someday. When you aren't out eating with the daughters of nobility."

Toby laughed. "It's my dear Mama makes me do it. She still doesn't think that the son of a baronet being in moving pictures is quite the done thing. Even though I'm the sixth and have no real expectations. Could you pass the salt please, Fiona?"

Miss Marsden obliged, rather peeved that she wasn't being invited to partake of the lady in question's culinary skills. "Do you have a good cook, Toby?"

"One without parallel, recommended to me by a friend of mother's. Mrs Forrest may be stout, have wrinkles and be able to grow a more impressive moustache than my father can, but her pastry is without parallel in the kingdom. I am truly spoiled," Toby patted his muscular waistline as if to emphasise the fact. Three young women in the vicinity nearly choked.

"And what about the daughters of the nobility?" Alasdair had a small, secretive smile on his face although only Toby seemed to notice it. "Do they approve of the culinary delights on offer?"

"They might if they ever were allowed to set foot through the door. I also possess the most ferocious butler, who will not allow any of the painted minxes as far as the top step. When I meet them it's strictly at an away venue." Toby cleared the last of the fricassee from his plate. "And you, Alasdair?"

That daughter of the Aga Khan or whoever it is that you trip the light fantastic with — does she like Mrs Whatever-she's-called's steak and kidney pudding? Assuming Mrs Thingy has bribed the butcher again."

Alasdair grinned. "Like you, Toby, I keep my pleasures to be partaken of away from the family hearth. Doesn't do to let these ladies become too ensconced at the fireside."

"Indeed. Well, cup of something alleged to resemble coffee and back to the Grindstone, I suppose. Shame I gave up cigarettes when I was twelve. I quite fancy one at pleasant times like this."

For some reason Alasdair began to choke on his coffee.

The close ups were eventually completed, Toby being praised over and over again for the way that he expressed such stiff upper lip and repressed emotion. Alasdair's eyebrows seemed to have acquired star status in their own right and were put to the test from every angle and in every way.

At last the action was wound up for the day, people repairing to dressing rooms to be changed, pampered and praised, emerging eventually as something less than they had appeared on set, something like ordinary folk.

"Are you two lads out with your girls tonight?" Fiona spoke lightly, but the question was loaded with hidden agendas.

"I'm washing my hair." Toby said, using a voice which exactly mimicked one of the starlets who had that particular line to employ in the film and who had milked it for all it was worth.

"Alasdair?" Fiona was nothing if not determined; years of trying to break into films had eliminated all elements of natural English reticence from her.

"Prior engagement for me — not like this old stick-at-home here." Alasdair poked Toby's ribs. "I appreciate a bit of romance and joie de vie." He lifted Fiona's hand and kissed it. "Till Monday, then."

The butler answered the door to the gentle knock, visibly relaxed when he saw who the visitor was and quickly ushered him indoors. This was one of the few people allowed over Toby's threshold. Outside it was raining pell-mell, a fortuitous thing as it kept the streets free from gawping eyes; not many fans knew where their idol lived, but those who did made things jolly awkward.

"Thought you'd get here, deluge notwithstanding." Toby came into the hall, helped divest his guest of his Mackintosh. "Can you rustle us up some coffee, McGuire? Decent stuff, not like that chicory-infested rubbish they deliver at the studio. I won't enquire too hard as to where you got hold of it."

The butler nodded, took the coat and shimmered away.

"We had a bit of an inquisition today." Alasdair slumped into his favourite seat by the fireside and started to thaw out a bit. It wasn't a particularly cold night yet the rain had gone through him. "Do you think Fiona suspects?"

Toby grinned, then settled down in the chair that was alongside his friend's. "No. I think she's just been reading too many magazines, assumes that we spend every night chatting up some lady or other and would like a piece of that particular action. Wants to make those tender moments on screen spill over into real life."

They sat in quiet companionship until the butler had brought them some excellent coffee and then been dismissed for the rest of the evening.

"Staying the night?" Toby laid down his cup, sauntered over to his friend's chair, plonked himself down in Alasdair's lap. Strong arms closed around him and he snuggled his head into his lover's neck.

"If you want me to. No filming tomorrow means no car in the morning. No doubt I'll read in the paper that I was at some club up west seeing in the dawn with an heiress. Or Fiona."

Alasdair lifted Toby's face to his, the better to kiss him. It wasn't the sort of tender, butterfly kiss which was all he was allowed to share with Fiona on screen (for which eventuality he was very grateful). This was passionate and raw, all the better for being shared behind closed doors and with the world locked out. And with the only person he had ever loved.

His eager fingers started to make their way down the row of Toby's waistcoat buttons.

"Now Mr. Hamilton, what would your adoring fans say if they knew what you were about?"

"They'd say that I was jolly lucky not to get pins and needles with you sitting in my lap. I dread to think how much you weigh, but it's all solid flesh." He prodded Toby's chest, enjoying the feeling of the firm muscle beneath his touch.

"Then do you wish to repair to my boudoir? Or as Fiona said in her first film 'fancy a fourpenny one?'"

"She never did."

"No. Actually she was playing an odalisque and said 'would you like to partake of a sherbet?' although the basic meaning was the same."

"I think I'd like to sit down on that rug by the fire. It was only a short walk from where I parked the car but I got pretty well soaked."

"Then take off your shoes and socks and we'll both toast our tootsies." Toby quickly bared his toes and sat in front of the hearth, feet turned towards the homely blaze. Alasdair joined him, sliding an arm around his shoulders, resting head against head.

"At least that rain meant that we were spared any watchers at the gates. Not even the most ardent of Toby Bowe fans would brave that downpour for a glimpse of their pin-up."

"And at least that meant you didn't have to scoot around to the tradesman's entrance. McGuire hates it when you have to pretend to be a delivery boy." Toby grinned, twisting his lover around for another kiss, while Alasdair began to get to work on more buttons, Toby's shirt this time.

"And what are you up to now, Charles? Does Linda Sheringham know that you're such a maniac for bare flesh?"

"No, she doesn't and she'll never get a chance to find out. I just have a fancy to see the very vest that made, according to the Daily Mail, three women faint when it was paraded in *Valour Undeterred*." Alasdair soon discovered that it wasn't that particular grey silk vest which Toby was wearing but a fine white linen one, in comparison to which the other was positively monastic. "This is new."

"Bought it for the latest film. I always hate the ones that wardrobe try to foist upon me." Toby pushed his lover down onto the Chinese rug, wreaking havoc with his fingers to Alasdair's tie, his shirt buttons, fly buttons. "Shame we'll never get the chance to play a scene like this for the cameras."

"They wouldn't even allow me to play one like this with Fiona. One little kiss then fade to black. Not," Alasdair fought to get his words out against mounting breathlessness, "I hasten to add, that I'm complaining." He didn't fight the depredations of Toby's keen hands.

"It would be nice though, don't you think? Playing the characters that we did in *Wings of Love* — a pair of squadron leaders — but instead of dancing with Patricia Morgan or whoever La Marsden was supposed to be, dancing with each other and smooching a bit." Toby's fingers had found a particularly succulent piece of flesh to assault.

"How am I supposed to answer sensibly when you do that?" Alasdair gasped. "It'll never happen. They'd never dare show such a thing on film, even one of those avant garde French ones. Now leave off a moment." He eased Toby's shirt and vest off his shoulders, letting them follow where the jacket and waistcoat had gone. "It's just as well, you know, all this censorship. This," he jabbed a finger at the rug, as though it were responsible for their actions, "is strictly between us. I would never want anyone knowing what went on behind our own closed doors."

"Given what usually happens, that's probably just as well." Toby's strong chest pressed his lover hard against the rug, his mouth unleashing a barrage of kisses on any part of Alasdair he could reach. "No need to put on a show for the cameras now. Just you, me and the fire with no necessity to repeat things again and again till we get them perfect."

Alasdair, breathless, husky voiced and about to lose all rational faculties, considered. "Actually, Toby, that wouldn't be a bad idea..."

If you like Alasdair and Toby, you can find another one of their adventures in “Home Fires Burning”, from Cheyenne Publishing.

The Case of the Overprotective Ass:

Stars of the silver screen Alasdair Hamilton and Toby Bowe are wowing the post WWII audiences with their depictions of Holmes and Watson. When they are asked by a friend to investigate a mysterious disappearance, they jump at the chance — surely detection can’t be that hard? But a series of threatening letters — and an unwanted suitor — make real life very different from the movies.