



The MAY DAY MYSTERY

By Octavus Roy Cohen

SYNOPSIS

Antoinette Peyton, senior at the southern university of Maryland, recalls Paterson Thayer's attention to her. Which, seven years ago, and there is a story scene, ending with bitter recriminations.

CHAPTER I—Continued

She had always been fond of Tony; and looked up to her. But she loved Pat... even though she didn't like his only expression, or the harsh sound of his voice, or the manner in which he grabbed Tony's arm. It was a Pat Thayer she had never before seen, and she felt vaguely disturbed.

And finally Pat Thayer spoke, his words freighted with fury.

"Up to now, Tony, I've played the game your way. So long as you keep out of my affairs, I'll continue to play it so. But if you want trouble, you'll have it—and plenty. That's a warning."

"Will you do what I ask?" she inquired steadily.

"I'll do as I—n well please!" Tony Peyton shook his hand from her arm. She stepped back and surveyed the man. She was a slim, straight, militant little figure and her eyes were full with anger and great determination.

"Very well," she said coldly. "That checks it right up to me, doesn't it?"

"It does," he rasped. "And if I were you, I'd think twice before I started anything."

Tony turned—and was gone with out another word or glance. Her lips crept close to Thayer and slipped her hand in his.

"Pat," she asked tremblingly. "What did she mean? What is it all about?"

For an instant the man forgot himself.

"Be—!" he said nastily. "Forget it!"

He drew back. For that instant there was a little girl again, rather than the mature woman. Tony believed herself to be. She was looking upon Pat Thayer with some startled eyes. Thayer, common-sense man of the world, expert in woman-pulling himself together with a visible effort. The vicious, steady light from his cold gray eyes was gone just then. He turned and he turned his attention once again to the exquisite little creature who had been swept from her feet by his mature strength and charm. He smiled gently and slipped his arm about her yielding waist.

"Scared, Honey?"

"The golden head nodded and her voice came up to him.

"What did she mean, Pat?"

He was in control of his emotions now, and his light, bantering manner returned. It delighted Thayer to captivate woman—even a woman so young and so beautiful. He smiled at this child who struggled against him.

"She," he announced. "Jealous, you mean?"

"We—oh—maybe."

She clung to him passionately.

"What I hated her, Pat. I thought that you and she—that is you both—"

"Now, now, Sweetness. You're not going to mistrust your Pat that moon are you? If some fool girl thinks she's got a claim on me, no. . . . He kissed her again, and she sighed and relaxed.

"We—we are engaged, aren't we, Pat?"

"Of course, Sugarplum. Firmly, finally and happily."

"And you're not peevish because I told Tony?"

"We—well, we had decided that I shouldn't be spread around the campus. But when the milk is already spilled—"

"I'm sorry, Sweetheart."

"And you won't doubt me any more?"

"No, Pat—never." But she pulled back in the embrace and stared up at him. "I couldn't help being jealous of Tony, though. I've always admired her and looked up to her—and all that. She's the prettiest girl on campus. And she's got just what I need."

Ivy cuddled her hand in his big palm. "I'll never love a man but I love you, Pat. And I guess no man loves just how a woman feels when another woman appreciates a pretty one like Tony—who's got everything, and money and all—comes along like she did, and kind of—"

"Oh, you know."

"Sure I know. But just so long as we understand each other. . . . I don't understand you, don't I, Pat?"

"Nothing less."

"And you understand me?"



"I Wish I Loved You Less, Tony."

My in the world. More than that, he was supposed to be the wealthiest man on the campus.

Most of the students laughed at Max—but they liked him just the same. They called him a boob—but a darned nice chap. There was always a song on his lips, and a smile. Innocuous, light-hearted, living only in the present and totally untroubled about the morrow, Max Vernon was as picturesque in his own way as Pat Thayer was in hers.

Between the two there existed a friendship which no one even tried to understand. Max idolized Thayer. Thayer, on his part, partly derided Max. . . . Max was a young man who seemed to entrench himself more firmly in Max's affections. Nor was that because Max needed friends. The Maryland campus was overflowing with those who genuinely liked the sunny lad—and with those who pretended to like him because the strings of his purse were always open. Max liked to be popular and he paid for his popularity. He was weak. . . . It was generally understood that he could make him do anything if he only approached him in the right way.

But now as he approached Pat and Ivy, there was no smile on his face. He looked at her. He looked at Ivy and addressed Ivy Welch.

"I guess this is nice," he said and then standing up for an hour."

She turned upon him a wide-eyed, white stare.

"Why, Max," she exclaimed, "I never did."

"I'll say you did."

"What?"

"Just now. Didn't you say you'd meet me at half past ten? Didn't you?"

"Did I, Max?"

"You certainly did. And I don't like to be stood up, either. I guess if you don't want to keep a date with me, you might make one."

Pat Thayer's steaming voice cut into the conversation.

"What you getting all heated up about, Max?"

"Plenty. Ivy had a date with me, and she didn't have any right standing me up."

"It wasn't her fault. I grabbed her and took her off for a walk."

"Yeah! But you didn't know she had a date with me."

"Didn't I?"

Vernon looked up quickly, his attention arrested by the answer.

"Did you?"

"Sure. She told me."

"You—just saying that to let Ivy down easy?"

"I'm saying it because it's true. Who do you think you are, Pat Boy, to say when a girl shall go with me and when she shall not?"

"I know. . . . But, Pat! Ivy and I have been running around together, and we had a date."

"Oh! to thunder with your dates. If your girl prefers to walk with me, she ran to it."

Pat's manner puzzled Vernon. He was accustomed to passive comment from his older friend, but there was an unpleasant, combative ring in Thayer's voice which roused resentment even in the breast of the placid stout boy. He knew nothing of the recent scene with Tony. He did not know that Pat Thayer was in an ugly mood; but he did know that while he would stand a very great deal from the latter's make-up would not tolerate the steering of his girl.

He turned on her.

"Are you coming with me, now, Ivy?"

She tossed her head.

"Certainly not. You've acted silly."

"I'll say he has!" interjected Thayer. "And how?"

Vernon's face flushed.

"You keep out of this, Pat."

"What's this about?"

"I'll do."

"Well, I'll be dog-goned. You do. And who are you?"

In all this time two years of intimacy, Thayer had never seen Max Vernon moved to anger. He was openly contemptuous of the younger man; but he did not credit him with sufficient strength of character to become really angry. But he did not know that herein he was striking down in his most vulnerable spot. Vernon had cut a great swath at Maryland with his lavish wardrobe, his big, high-powered car, his brilliant parties and his free spending. But there were few who knew that Max had been more worried recently than he cared to admit even to himself.

His money was gone, or nearly gone. He had piled up on him. He was an orphan, and the inheritance which had enabled him to spend so lavishly and which to him had seemed hereditary, was now nearly dissipated.

Lovely, Max had never permitted himself to think where a great deal of the money had journeyed. It was queer, though, that in two years of playing cards with Pat Thayer in the privacy of Pat's room there had been a steady flow of cash from Vernon to the older man. Like a good sport, Max put it all down to hard luck. That he had been so thoroughly and systematically bled by a college crack never occurred to him. . . . or, certainly it never had occurred until this moment, when he had piled up on him. He was an orphan, and the inheritance which had enabled him to spend so lavishly and which to him had seemed hereditary, was now nearly dissipated.

"You've taken everything I had and now you're throwing me aside, eh?"

Pat cast a startled glance at Vernon. He had never credited Max with any such keenness of perception.

"Put it any way you like. Only for G-d's sake, quit whining around me."

"I'll quit," Pat. But I'll start thinking. I guess I've been awful dumb. You haven't. I begin to see more and more clearly that you're been wise as I—"

Pat Thayer raised his arm threateningly. "One more word like that, Vernon, and I'll—"

But Vernon's eyes were half closed. He spoke in a grim whisper.

"If you lay a hand on me, Thayer," he said quietly, "I'll kill you."

For a second the tableau held. Then—not knowing why he did so—Thayer lowered his fist. He turned away.

"Come along, Ivy," he said with a laugh which somehow was not hearty. "Let's get away from the kindergarten."

CHAPTER II

LARRY WELCH, Bachelor of Arts, Maryland—first and candidate for a Master's degree, sat at his desk in Academic hall facing rows of empty benches. From the outside the dorms of a campus gone gay, and Larry leaned back in his chair, half closed his eyes, and gave himself over to the luxury of formless, delicious thoughts. One more month, and he'd have his Master's degree, one more month and his connection with Maryland would be officially severed. The day of all days it came to Larry Welch most poignantly that he was sorry.

For five years his life had been lived on the Maryland campus. Until the preceding June there had been shrouded upon him all the culminating glories of a great athlete and an outstanding student. In college in a small, intimate and prideful college.

He was not a large man. At no time Larry ever weighed more than a hundred and sixty-five. A casual observer would have considered him well formed, but rather inclined to slenderness. Nevertheless, the powerful muscular development beneath his loose-fitting clothes; the superb synchronization of those muscles with a keen and alert brain.

Nor was he handsome in a classic sense. Like his sister, Ivy, he was thick-limbed—rather. Not a handsome type. His cheeks were pink and boyish; his eyes the blue of a spring sky.

Every person in college was Larry's friend, or wanted to be. The freshmen who took English from him this year adored him. Frankly, he considered himself a rather poor teacher and was delighted that his freshmen liked him so well that they studied reasonably hard and did not confront him with the horror of flunking, anyone who wasn't a boy or girl of those who wouldn't—and didn't—work his head off for Fessie Welch.

But Commencement marked the end. Today that idea struck Larry more forcibly than ever before. While the weather was bleak and damp, Commencement had seemed far away; now that summer had burst suddenly upon the campus, it seemed that the end was upon him. He almost regretted his refusal of an offer to accept the position of assistant football coach and associate professor. Yet he quivered but he dared not let sentiment away him.

He was twenty-three years of age. In the city of Birmingham a job awaited him; a job offering him enough salary to live well, save a trifle—and plan for the future; the last being something which Larry most ardently desired to do.

The future. . . . the prospect was delightfully linked with visions of a house and a girl. . . . a girl slim and straight and vivacious; a girl whom he had known for three marvelous years and who was the envy of Maryland if for no other reason than that she had won the affection of the great Larry Welch.

And even as Larry thought of her, the door opened and Tony Peyton entered the room abruptly.

She stood framed in the doorway, an exquisite little figure, her big black eyes shining into his, her eager smile on her sensitive lips. He gazed his idolatry for the full period of time it took the mellow chimes of the clock in the tower of the main building to toll twelve. Noon! Noon of May day!

It was the girl who broke the spell. She closed the door leading into the corridor and advanced toward his desk. He was smiling eagerly as he rose to meet her.

"Believe it or not," he challenged. "I was just thinking of you, Tony."

She flushed at the declaration in his eyes. She put both her hands in his and pressed them tightly. "I wish I loved you less, Tony."

"Why?"

"For an instant the roguish smile which he so loved played across her lips. But it was gone almost as soon as it appeared and the face she turned up to his was very, very serious.

"Pat I thought you were friends."

"Were is right."

Max Vernon stepped close.

"You're kind of through with me, aren't you Pat?"

"You said it."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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