

Full Disclosure: the following story is a work of fiction, which first appeared in an issue of Collier’s magazine in 1943.

*John Blanchard stood up from the bench, straightened his Army uniform, and studied the crowd of people making their way through Grand Central Station. He looked for the girl whose heart he knew, but whose face he didn’t: the girl with the rose.*

*His interest in her had begun thirteen months before in a Florida Library. Taking a book off the shelf, he found himself intrigued, not with the words of the book, but with the notes penciled in the margin. The handwriting revealed a thoughtful soul and an insightful mind. In the front of the book, he discovered the previous owner’s name, Miss Hollis Maynell. With time and effort he located her address. She now lived in New York City. He wrote her a letter introducing himself and inviting her to respond. The next day he was shipped overseas for service in World War II. During the next year and one month the two grew to know each other through the mail. A romance was budding. Blanchard requested a photograph, but she refused. She felt that if he really cared, it wouldn’t matter what she looked like.*

*When the day finally came for him to return from Europe, they scheduled their first meeting—7:00 at Grand Central Station. “You’ll recognize me,” she wrote, “by the red rose I’ll be wearing on my lapel.” So at 7:00 he was in the station looking for a girl whose heart he loved, but whose face he had never seen. He was in for the surprise of his life. I’ll let Mr. Blanchard tell you what happened next.*

*“A young woman was coming towards me, her figure long and slim. Her blond hair lay in delicate curls, her eyes were as blue as flowers. Her lips and chin had a gentle firmness, and in her pale green suit she was like springtime come alive. I started towards her, entirely forgetting that she was not wearing a rose. As I approached, a small smile curved her lips. “Goin’ my way?” she said. I took one step closer to her, and then I saw Miss Hollis Maynell.”*

*“She was standing almost directly behind the amazing lady in the pale green suit. Standing there with graying hair tucked under a worn hat. She was more than plump, with thick-ankled feet thrust into low-heeled shoes. That lovely girl was walking quickly away. I felt as though I would split in two, so keen was my desire to follow her, and yet so deep was my longing for the woman whose spirit had truly companioned me and held me up during the war. And there she stood. Her face was gentle and sensible, her grey eyes had a warm and kindly twinkle. I did not hesitate. My finger gripped the small leather copy of the book that was to identify me to her. This would be something precious, a friendship for which I had been and must be ever grateful. I squared my shoulders, saluted, and held out the book to the woman, even though while I spoke I felt choked by my disappointment. “I’m Lt. John Blanchard, and you must be Miss Maynell. I am so glad you could meet me; May I take you to dinner?”*

*The woman’s face broadened into a tolerant smile. “I don’t know what this is about, son,” she answered, “but the young lady in the green suit who just went by, she begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said if you were to ask me out to dinner, I should tell you that she is waiting for you in the big restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of test!”*

One of the biggest tests a Christian has to face is loving a God whose letters we’ve read, whose heart we’ve come to know through those words, but whose face we’ve never seen. The apostle John says it in very plain language today: “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” It really does come down to this: Love God; love other people, and just like

the story about John Blanchard and Hollis Maynell, God is going to test our love for him. How's He going to do that? It's simple. He's going to observe how we love other people. He's going to watch how we treat people. He's going to see how we forgive people...or not. So. How are you doing with loving God and the people around you? If your life was examined, who would emerge as the person you love the most? And where would God fit into the order of your loves?

John writes: "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." If this bothers your conscience; if loving the people in your life with a godly love is a struggle for you, then I invite you to join me in asking God to change our hearts today. Let's answer the call of the Holy Spirit to turn our backs on old ways of thinking and behaving. Let's take the gifts Jesus paid for with His blood. Again, John writes "In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Love from God is always backed up by action. That what's the word 'propitiation' tries to communicate. With God, sin had to be punished; it has to be dealt with. He never just winks at it and lets it go. That's a serious problem for me and you, until we learn that instead of making us pay the full price for our sin, he had Jesus switch places with us. Jesus paid for you and me on the cross. That means your sins and mine no longer condemn us. They are gone. They died when Jesus died.

This is what the Bible calls the gospel—the news that changes things. Jesus exchanged his life for ours. That's what he was getting at when He called himself "the Good Shepherd" who lays down his life for the sheep. In contrast to a hired hand with no stake in the sheep, who runs at the first sign of a predator, Jesus' idea of shepherding means he will fight to the death, if necessary, to protect his flock. He'll go out there with rod and staff if he has to. He'll go out there and get beaten and whipped and nailed to a cross if he has to. You want to talk about a test of love? There it is. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, lays himself down on the altar of sacrifice, so you can be free. He doesn't just talk about love, or teach it as a concept; he demonstrates what it is. True love, Jesus reveals, is a decision to sacrifice and give yourself to another. The cross is the ultimate expression of sacrificial, self-giving love. Through Jesus' suffering and death on the cross, your account with God is settled. When you trust that God had declared you "not guilty" because of Jesus, then your soul can finally rest.

And something else happens too. When that forgiveness settles into your heart and soul, you will become very conscious of the fact that every day brings new opportunities to sacrifice and give yourself to another. And usually not in some big, dramatic way. You'll be sacrificing something, your comfort, your time, your schedule, maybe your money. You'll be presented with chances to give up something so that you can build into someone else's life. And it'll be a joy; it will be meaningful; it will be an act of worship. You'll do it out of love. And when you do, you just might be in for the surprise of your life.