

A Welcome

Distraction

by

Audrey Glenn

Nathaniel Carter located his friend, David Beaufort, right away when he entered the Coffee Room at City Tavern. It had been over a month since they'd met at this place. After Nathaniel began courting David's sister-in-law, Helen, Nathaniel had spent most of his free time in the Beauforts' drawing room, or walking with Helen in the derelict city square. Even the depressing scenery was an improvement over David's hawkish gaze as he carefully oversaw their courtship, wary of even a hint of impropriety.

Nathaniel glanced over his shoulder to the servingman. "Did you already order?"

"For both of us," David confirmed. "Now, where have you been?"

"I've stayed away, just like you told me." Nathaniel gratefully accepted a scone from the tray set before him. This was the first time all day he'd gotten a chance to eat something.

David glared pointedly at him, and Nathaniel froze mid-bite. "I told you Helen was ill and that you might not wish to visit with her, but that was over a week ago and in all that time

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you haven't attempted to ascertain her welfare."

"Is she well? She's not . . . She hasn't . . ." Nathaniel couldn't finish the thought out loud. Wouldn't someone have told him if Helen had taken a turn for the worse?

"Do you really think I'd been sitting here taking tea with you if Helen had been carried off by the putrid throat?" David demanded.

"No?" Nathaniel guessed.

David aggressively smeared jam over a piece of Sally Lunn bread. "Of course not!"

Helen was well, then. Release coursed through him. "This isn't tea," Nathaniel muttered, lifting his coffee to mark his point.

David completely ignored this jab. "Well, it was very badly done of you not to send as much as a note. Helen is distraught over your neglect."

Nathaniel rubbed his forehead. "I didn't realize I was supposed to write."

"I'd have thought a man in love would be beside himself with worry and loneliness." David jabbed the Sally Lunn bread like a pointer. "Unless you're not really in love?"

"I do love Helen," Nathaniel protested. "And I've been very lonely without her." He couldn't even remember how he used to spend his time before their courtship. "I just assumed I'd get in the way."

David's eyes shot to the ceiling. "You've convinced her you care nothing for her and that you'll soon express your desire never to see her again."

Where had Helen gotten that idea? "I haven't said anything like that!"

"You haven't said anything at all to her in the last week," David retorted. "Well, you better speak to her and settle things. You've been courting her for weeks now, and certain

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expectations have been raised.”

“Expectations?” Nathaniel repeated.

David nodded. “Marriage.”

“Oh.” Well, Nathaniel certainly couldn’t imagine his life without Helen, but he couldn’t marry, not before his three ships returned from their spring voyages. He’d barely managed to put off his creditors after he’d lost his tea cargo two months before. There’d be plenty of time to think of marriage after that. “I’ll visit her and make my feelings clear.”

“See that you do,” David told him.

They finished their meal in relatively good spirits, then Nathaniel returned with David to his rented flat above Josiah Hayes’s law office.

“You may have a few minutes to speak to her,” David informed Nathaniel as they walked up the stairs to the flat. “Alone,” he clarified.

Nathaniel straightened his black coat, wishing he’d worn the nicer one with the silver buttons.



Helen Crofton sat alone on the couch embroidering a cushion in the drawing room when Nathaniel entered. “Good afternoon.”

Helen offered him a small smile. “How kind of you to call.”

“You look quite pale,” Nathaniel remarked. He took a seat at her side.

“What a compliment!” If he intended to end their courtship, as she very much suspected he did, he certainly didn’t need to start off by insulting her. He might as well have said she looked like death.

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He seemed to realize instantly that he'd said the wrong thing. "You still look very nice."

Helen resumed her embroidery. "You must have been very busy with your work over the last week."

"Yes, I've had all kinds of trouble trying to secure buyers for the cargo that will come in on *His Majesty's Triumph*." Nathaniel related all he'd been through with the merchants who didn't want to tie up their limited capital in expected cargo when the fate of the Colonies was in some confusion.

"I'm very sorry for all your trouble." She pulled a long red thread through the fabric and snipped it.

"You're all better, then?" Nathaniel spoke slowly, as if in some confusion

"I was hardly ill," Helen informed him. "I think David may have overreacted a bit much." She stuffed the scissors into her workbasket and turned to look directly at Nathaniel, who smiled uncertainly at her.

Guessing at his motivations was ridiculous; she'd just ask him. "Why didn't you come to see me?"

"I didn't think you'd want me bothering you while you were recovering," he explained.

"I would've liked you bothering me." Helen informed him. "I thought you wanted to be shut of me!"

Nathaniel leaned forward and rested his head in his hands. "I've made an awful mess of things. What must you think of me? You deserve a suitor who doesn't need to be told how to go about the business of courting."

Helen placed a hand on his shoulder. "I still . . ." She searched for the right word. "—care for you." Care was appropriate, wasn't it, when two people hadn't yet spoken of love? "Are you telling me you feel the same?"

Nathaniel sat up immediately and took Helen's hand. "I more than care for you, Helen—I love you."

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“Oh!” She wasn’t required to make further reply, as Nathaniel began kissing her and she wanted to give the proceedings her full consideration. They’d barely been left alone since they’d begun courting.

Nathaniel was trailing kisses along her jaw when David sprang through the open doorway. “I give you a few minutes alone, and this is what you get up to!” David proclaimed with disgust.

Helen glared at her brother-in-law, but Nathaniel didn’t release her. “We haven’t finished discussing the expectations,” he said cryptically.

David sighed heavily. “Five more minutes.”

“Honestly,” Helen protested, before David had completely disappeared, “I’m twenty-six years old!”

“I know,” Nathaniel said quickly, cutting her off before she could really warm to the subject. “He’s being ridiculous.”

“I can still hear you!” David called.

“Before he comes back,” Nathaniel whispered, “I understand you have expectations of marriage.”

Didn’t he? “Yes?”

Nathaniel beamed at her. “I want to marry you as well.”

Helen felt as if her heart was lifting out of her chest. This was it, then. Nathaniel didn’t want to end their courtship; he wished them to marry! “We could have the banns read this week, if you hurry to speak to Mr. Peters.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean marry right away,” Nathaniel corrected. “I meant eventually. I couldn’t possibly marry for some time.”

Helen stared at him in surprise. “Why not?”

“It’s essential for me to stay entirely focused on my work. I can’t have a wife and family distracting me before I’ve secured my business.” He caressed his shoulders with her thumbs. “Surely, you understand?”

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“I . . .” Helen tried to think of what to say. “I understand.” She understood that Nathaniel might love her, but he loved his profession more.



Nathaniel took his leave shortly after David resumed his duties as chaperone. With things between him and Helen cinched, he could go back to finding a buyer for the remaining cargo.

Helen hadn't asked him to stay for supper; odd, but perhaps her anger at David had taken the issue from her mind. Nathaniel couldn't have stayed in any event, not with all the work he had before him.

He trudged up and down High Street speaking to the merchants he'd done business with in the past, but he still couldn't find one willing to place an order.

As he passed the law office once more, he realized that all he wanted at the moment was to spend a few more hours in Helen's company, even under David's scrutiny. Now that he'd explained what he was trying to achieve by securing his business, she would surely share in his concern. After all, he was working hard to provide the best possible life for her once they eventually did marry.

Hayes's clerks sat hunched over their tables, scribbling away at their work, as Nathaniel made his way back up the stairs to the Beauforts' flat.

Mrs. Beaufort answered his knocks. “Oh, have you returned? Helen's gone out, I'm afraid.”

Nathaniel frowned. “Oh.” He must have missed her, for all he'd been on the street near her home for hours.

“To the Goodwins', if I recall properly,” Mrs. Beaufort

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added.

“I’ll try there.” Humphrey Goodwin would certainly invite Nathaniel to a repast, and perhaps Nathaniel could walk her home.

Goodwin was eager to welcome Nathaniel into his study. “My daughter has gone out with a friend,” he explained, “and I am enjoying the quiet state of the house.”

Nathaniel refrained from a sigh. “I don’t wish to interrupt your enjoyment, sir.” He didn’t want to be trapped uselessly at the Goodwins’ home without Helen.

“Nonsense, I appreciate the company of another man! Have you eaten? I was just about to ring for supper.”

Nathaniel settled in for what hopefully wouldn’t be an extended meal.



Helen tried to attend to her friend Euphemia’s rambling story as they traveled through Philadelphia in the Goodwins’ coach, but she was having a difficult time thinking of anything other than Nathaniel’s declaration of love and subsequent revelation that she ranked second in his affections.

She could accept the idea that he needed time to settle his finances before they married, but that wasn’t what he’d said. *I can’t have a wife and family distracting me before I’ve secured my business.* That was all she was to him? A distraction?

“And then I suggested a posset,” Euphemia was saying, “but he didn’t feel it would be efficacious on a broken ankle. How dreary to break one’s ankle before a ball and to have to sit among the spinsters and old ladies!”

“Dreary,” Helen murmured. Should she end her courtship with Nathaniel, seeing as how she meant so little to him? The

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very idea brought tears to her eyes, but she didn't wish to dangle after him for years until he decided he was rich enough to marry.

"That was a very sad reason for calling on a friend," Euphemia commented.

"Yes." Their friend Jane's father had passed away suddenly; a reminder that some had it much worse than Helen.

"I'm not certain the visit cheered her; what do you think?"

Jane hadn't seemed particularly pleased to see them, but she hadn't been unwelcoming. "It's hard to tell with her."

Euphemia nodded vigorously. "I believe she finds it hard to express how she's really feeling."

"Some people are like that." Perhaps Nathaniel was among them?

Helen stepped out of Euphemia's coach and bade her friend farewell. She knew she'd been horrible company, barely speaking a word, but Euphemia was merciful enough to overlook it.

David was the only person in the drawing room when Helen entered, and she hardly wanted to speak to *him*. "Where's my sister?"

"Gone to bed." Cassandra would have her baby within a few weeks and had certainly earned the right to sleep as much as she liked. Helen turned to go to her own room.

"What's gotten into you?"

She spun back around to face David, who was lounging in his favorite corner chair. "Why, do you wish to lecture me, *Father?*"

David flinched. "I'm not trying to act like your father. I just want to look out for you as a brother would."

Helen didn't have any brothers, but she couldn't imagine David's antics could be considered normal. "And would a good brother burst in and embarrass me?"

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He stared back at her, a twisted smile on his face. “Though I possess two brothers, I don’t have much experience of family life.”

Helen’s heart softened a little. David spoke so little of his family but the little he’d revealed wasn’t pleasant. “You’re a wonderful brother. I could hardly imagine a better one.”

“I will make myself scarce when Nathaniel visits.” David sighed heavily. “Much as it offends my brotherly impulses.”

“You don’t have to disappear completely.” She took a seat on the couch across from David. “This whole discussion is irrelevant; I’m not sure Nathaniel and I will be courting much longer.”

David set his paper aside. “What’s this?”

Helen looked down at her hands. “Nathaniel explained to me that his work is far more important to him than marriage.”

“He said *what*?” David demanded. He got to his feet. “I’m going to find him right now and force him to explain the meaning of this.”

“I don’t wish you to get involved!” Helen said hastily. “I’ll decide what to do on my own.”

David resumed his seat. “I thought I’d influenced Nathaniel to be far more tactful.”

“It’s better for me to know now that Nathaniel feels that way before we proceed further in our courtship.” Even if the knowledge hurt.

“He really said that he held his business ventures higher in his esteem?” David shook his head.

“He said a wife and children would distract him from securing his business,” Helen clarified.

“Helen!” David protested, “That puts things in an entirely different light!”

“I don’t see how.”

David rested his elbow on the arm of his wingback chair

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and put his forehead in his hand as if they were both of them hopeless. “He wants to secure his business so he can provide for you!”

“That’s *not* what he said.” Not even remotely.

“But it’s what he meant. I’m certain of it. A man wishes to be certain he can provide for a family. I felt the same way before I asked Cassandra to marry me.”

Helen wasn’t too upset to see the situations weren’t at all similar. “You sailed to America with trunks of gold, while Nathaniel has worked since he was a child. What did you have to be worried about?”

“No matter how much gold I had, I wished Cassandra to feel she could depend on me, just as Nathaniel wishes for you to feel you can trust him.” David sat back in his chair. “Perhaps I should write a book for ladies as well, interpreting the hidden meanings of men.”

“If that’s what he meant, that’s what he should’ve said,” Helen retorted. Was that what Nathaniel was trying to say? Was it worth asking him?

A knock at the door startled the pair. “Are you expecting someone?” David asked.

“No.” She knew better than to think Nathaniel was calling to speak to her. He was most likely still in his tiny office at the back of his warehouse.

David waved a hand. “Well, Westing will deal with it.”

Helen loved Nathaniel enough to give him the chance to explain himself more before she decided to end the courtship. Dared she hope this would all work out?



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Nathaniel followed Westing to the Beauforts' drawing room for the second time that day. He'd left the Goodwins' as soon as he could, but not before Miss Goodwin returned home without Helen. He could have just returned home, or to work in his office until it was full dark, but he had an irrational need to see Helen.

He didn't want to do this anymore, to try and track Helen down, or to sit with her an hour a day under David's scrutiny. Did she feel the same way?

"Mr. Carter," Westing announced.

To Nathaniel's surprise, David immediately stood. "I'll let you speak in private."

Helen made room for Nathaniel on the couch. "You came back?"

"I needed to speak to you." He seized her hands. "I've been thinking about our courtship."

"Ah." Helen's face was inscrutable.

Nathaniel charged ahead. "I think we should marry."

Helen gasped. "What? A few hours ago you said I was a distraction from your work."

"Yes, but then I realized that I wish for you to distract me." He leaned in to kiss her, but she pulled back from him after a moment.

"Nathaniel, I must ask you if your work is more important to you than I am?"

Why did she seem so angry? "Of course not! Ever since I began courting you, you've been the inspiration for all my efforts."

Helen sighed and rested her head against his chest. "Why didn't you just say that earlier?"

Nathaniel brought his arms around her and kissed her head. "You should know by now that I'm terrible at explaining myself."

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“I believe I did know that,” Helen teased, and kissed him.

“I’ll try to get better, but I might still plague you after we’re married,” Nathaniel informed her between kisses.

“You’re asking me, then? Five years from now, or . . .”

He pressed his nose against hers. “I’ll see that vicar tomorrow.”

“Congratulations,” David called, coming back through the doorway. “It’s about time. Now, should we hold a reception here or at City Tavern?”

“Probably at my aunt and uncle’s home,” Helen replied, settling in Nathaniel’s arms. He kissed the top of her ear despite David’s pointed look. This—less the overbearing oversight—was precisely what he wanted, always.

The End