SAUCE FOR THE GOOSE*

The incident in the garage was the third near-catastrophe in the Amory household, and it put a horrible thought into Loren Amory’s head: his darling wife Olivia was trying to kill herself.

Loren had pulled at a plastic clothesline dangling from a high shelf in the garage – his idea had been to tidy up, to coil the clothesline properly – and at that first tug an avalanche of suitcases, an old lawnmower, and a sewing machine weighing God-knows-how-much crashed down on the spot that he barely had time to leap from.

Loren walked slowly back to the house, his heart pounding at his awful discovery. He entered the kitchen and made his way to the stairs. Olivia was in bed, propped against pillows, a magazine in her lap. ‘What was that terrible noise, dear?’

Loren cleared his throat and settled his black-rimmed glasses more firmly on his nose. ‘A lot of stuff in the garage. I pulled just a little bit on a clothesline –’ He explained what had happened.

She blinked calmly as if to say, ‘Well, so what? Things like that do happen.’

‘Have you been up to that shelf for anything lately?’

‘Why, no. Why?’

‘Because – well, everything was just poised to fall, darling.’

‘Are you blaming me?’ she asked in a small voice.

‘Blaming your carelessness, yes. I arranged those suitcases up there and I’d never have put them so they’d fall at a mere touch.

And I didn’t put the sewing machine on top of the heap. Now, I’m not saying –’

‘Blaming my carelessness,’ she repeated, affronted.

He knelt quickly beside the bed. ‘Darling, let’s not hide things
any more. Last week there was the carpet sweeper on the cellar stairs. And that ladder! You were going to climb it to knock down that wasps’ nest! What I’m getting at, darling, is that you want something to happen to you, whether you realize it or not. You’ve got to be more careful, Olivia – Oh, darling, please don’t cry. I’m trying to help you. I’m not criticizing.’

‘I know, Loren. You’re good. But my life – it doesn’t seem worth living any more, I suppose. I don’t mean I’m trying to end my life, but –’

‘You’re still thinking – of Stephen?’ Loren hated the name and hated saying it.

She took her hands down from her pinkened eyes. ‘You made me promise you not to think of him, so I haven’t. I swear it, Loren.’

‘Good, darling. That’s my little girl.’ He took her hands in his.

‘What do you say to a cruise soon? Maybe in February? Myers is coming back from the coast and he can take over for me for a couple of weeks. What about Haiti or Bermuda?’

She seemed to think about it for a moment, but at last shook her head and said she knew he was only doing it for her, not because he really wanted to go. Loren remonstrated briefly, then gave it up. If Olivia didn’t take to an idea at once, she never took to it. There had been one triumph – his convincing her that it made sense not to see Stephen Castle for a period of three months.

Olivia had met Stephen Castle at a party given by one of Loren’s colleagues on the Stock Exchange*. Stephen was thirty-five, was ten years younger than Loren and one year older than Olivia, and Stephen was an actor. Loren had no idea how Toohey, their host that evening, had met him, or why he had invited him to a party at which every other man was either in banking or on the Exchange; but there he’d been, like an evil alien spirit, and he’d concentrated on Olivia the entire evening, and she’d responded with her charming smiles
that had captured Loren in a single evening eight years ago.

Afterwards, when they were driving back to Old Greenwich, Olivia had said, 'It's such fun to talk to somebody who's not in the stock-market for a change! He told me he's rehearsing in a play now – *The Frequent Guest*. We've got to see it, Loren.'

They saw it. Stephen Castle was on for perhaps five minutes in Act One. They visited Stephen backstage, and Olivia invited him to a cocktail party they were giving the following weekend. He came, and spent that night in their guest room. In the next weeks Olivia drove her car into New York at least twice a week on shopping expeditions, but she made no secret of the fact she saw Stephen for lunch on those days and sometimes for cocktails too. At last she told Loren she was in love with Stephen and wanted a divorce.

Loren was speechless at first, even inclined to grant her a divorce by way of being sportsmanlike; but forty-eight hours after her announcement he came to what he considered his senses. By that time he had measured himself against his rival – not merely physically (Loren did not come off so well there, being no taller than Olivia, with a receding hairline and a small paunch) but morally and financially as well. In the last two categories he had it all over Stephen Castle, and modestly he pointed this out to Olivia.

'I'd never marry a man for his money,' she retorted.

'I didn't mean you married me for my money, dear. I just happened to have it. But what's Stephen Castle ever going to have? Nothing much, from what I can see of his acting. You're used to more than he can give you. And you've known him only six weeks. How can you be sure his love for you is going to last?'

That last thought made Olivia pause. She said she would see Stephen just once more – 'to talk it over'. She drove to New York one morning and did not return until midnight. It was a Sunday, when Stephen had no performance. Loren sat up waiting for her.
In tears Olivia told him that she and Stephen had come to an understanding. They would not see each other for a month, and if at the end of that time they did not feel the same way about each other, they would agree to forget the whole thing.

‘But of course you’ll feel the same,’ Loren said. ‘What’s a month in the life of an adult? If you’d try it for three months —’

She looked at him through tears. ‘Three months?’

‘Against the eight years we’ve been married? Is that unfair? Our marriage deserves at least a three-month chance, too, doesn’t it?’

‘All right, it’s a bargain. Three months. I’ll call Stephen tomorrow and tell him. We won’t see each other or telephone for three months.’

From that day Olivia had gone into a decline. She lost interest in gardening, in her bridge club, even in clothes. Her appetite fell off, though she did not lose much weight, perhaps because she was proportionately inactive. They had never had a servant. Olivia took pride in the fact that she had been a working girl, a saleswoman in the gift department of a large store in Manhattan, when Loren met her. She liked to say that she knew how to do things for herself. The big house in Old Greenwich was enough to keep any woman busy, though Loren had bought every conceivable labour-saving device. They also had a walk-in deep freeze, the size of a large closet, in the basement, so that their marketing was done less often than usual, and all food was delivered, anyway. Now that Olivia seemed low in energy, Loren suggested getting a maid, but Olivia refused.

Seven weeks went by, and Olivia kept her word about not seeing Stephen. But she was obviously so depressed, so ready to burst into tears, that Loren lived constantly on the brink of weakening and telling her that if she loved Stephen that much, she had a right to see him. Perhaps, Loren thought, Stephen Castle was feeling the same way, also counting off the weeks
until he could see Olivia again. If so, Loren had already lost.

But it was hard for Loren to give Stephen credit for feeling anything. He was a lanky, rather stupid chap with oat-coloured hair, and Loren had never seen him without a sickly smile on his mouth – as if he were a human billboard, perpetually displaying what he must have thought was his most flattering expression.

Loren, a bachelor until at thirty-seven he married Olivia, often sighed in dismay at the ways of women. For instance, Olivia: if he had felt so strongly about another woman, he would have set about promptly to extricate himself from his marriage. But here was Olivia hanging on, in a way. What did she expect to gain from it, he wondered. Did she think, or hope, that her infatuation for Stephen might disappear? Or did she know unconsciously that her love for Stephen Castle was all fantasy, and that her present depression represented to her and to Loren a fitting period of mourning for a love she didn’t have the courage to go out and take?

But the Saturday of the garage incident made Loren doubt that Olivia was indulging in fantasy. He did not want to admit that Olivia was attempting to take her own life, but logic compelled him to. He had read about such people. They were different from the accident-prone, who might live to die a natural death, whatever that was. The others were the suicide-prone, and into this category he was sure Olivia fell.

A perfect example was the ladder episode. Olivia had been on the fourth or fifth rung when Loren noticed the crack in the left side of the ladder, and she had been quite unconcerned, even when he pointed it out to her. If it hadn’t been for her saying she suddenly felt a little dizzy looking up at the wasps’ nest, he never would have started to do the chore himself, and therefore wouldn’t have seen the crack.

Loren noticed in the newspaper that Stephen’s play was closing,
and it seemed to him that Olivia’s gloom deepened. Now there were dark circles under her eyes. She claimed she could not fall asleep before dawn.

‘Call him if you want to, darling,’ Loren finally said. ‘See him once again and find out if you both –’

‘No, I made a promise to you. Three months, Loren. I’ll keep my promise,’ she said with a trembling lip.

Loren turned away from her, wretched and hating himself.

Olivia grew physically weaker. Once she stumbled coming down the stairs and barely caught herself on the banister. Loren suggested, not for the first time, that she see a doctor, but she refused to.

‘The three months are nearly up, dear. I’ll survive them,’ she said, smiling sadly.

It was true. Only two more weeks remained until 15 March, the three months’ deadline. The Ides of March*, Loren realized for the first time. A most ominous coincidence.

On Sunday afternoon Loren was looking over some office reports in his study when he heard a long scream, followed by a clattering crash. In an instant he was on his feet and running. It had come from the cellar, he thought, and if so, he knew what had happened. That damned carpet sweeper again!

‘Olivia?’

From the dark cellar he heard a groan. Loren plunged down the steps. There was a little whirr of wheels, his feet flew up in front of him, and in the few seconds before his head smashed against the cement floor he understood everything: Olivia had not fallen down the cellar steps, she had only lured him here; all this time she had been trying to kill him, Loren Amory – and all for Stephen Castle.

‘I was upstairs in bed reading,’ Olivia told the police, her hands shaking as she clutched her dressing gown around her. ‘I heard a
terrible crash and then — I came down —’ She gestured helplessly
toward Loren’s dead body.

The police took down what she told them and commiserated
with her. People ought to be more careful, they said, about things
like carpet sweepers on dark stairways. There were fatalities like
this every day in the United States. Then the body was taken
away, and on Tuesday Loren Amory was buried.

Olivia rang Stephen on Wednesday. She had been telephoning
him every day except Saturdays and Sundays, but she had not
rung him since the previous Friday. They had agreed that any
weekday she did not call him at his apartment at 11 a.m. would
be a signal that their mission had been accomplished. Also, Loren
Amory had got quite a lot of space on the obituary page Monday.
He had left nearly a million dollars to his widow, and houses in
Florida, Connecticut and Maine.

‘Dearest! You look so tired!’ were Stephen’s first words to her
when they met in an out-of-the-way bar in New York on
Wednesday.

‘Nonsense! It’s all make-up,’ Olivia said gaily. ‘And you an
actor!’ She laughed. ‘I have to look properly gloomy for my
neighbours, you know. And I’m never sure when I’ll run into
someone I know in New York.’

Stephen looked around him nervously, then said with his
habitual smile, ‘Darling Olivia, how soon can we be together?’

‘Very soon,’ she said promptly. ‘Not up at the house, of course,
but remember we talked about a cruise? Maybe Trinidad? I’ve got
the money with me. I want you to buy the tickets.’

They took separate staterooms, and the local Connecticut
paper, without a hint of suspicion, reported that Mrs Amory’s
voyage was for reasons of health.

Back in the United States in April, suntanned and looking much
improved Olivia confessed to her friends that she had met
someone she was 'interested in'. Her friends assured her that was normal, and that she shouldn't be alone for the rest of her life. The curious thing was that when Olivia invited Stephen to a dinner party at her house, none of her friends remembered him, though several had met him at that cocktail party a few months before. Stephen was much more sure of himself now, and he behaved like an angel, Olivia thought.

In August they were married. Stephen had been getting nibbles in the way of work, but nothing materialized. Olivia told him not to worry, that things would surely pick up after the summer. Stephen did not seem to worry very much, though he protested he ought to work, and said if necessary he would try for some television parts. He developed an interest in gardening, planted some young blue spruces, and generally made the place look alive again.

Olivia was delighted that Stephen liked the house, because she did. Neither of them ever referred to the cellar stairs, but they had a light switch put at the top landing, so that a similar thing could not occur again. Also, the carpet sweeper was kept in its proper place, in the broom closet in the kitchen.

They entertained more often than Olivia and Loren had done. Stephen had many friends in New York, and Olivia found them amusing. But Stephen, Olivia thought, was drinking just a little too much. At one party, when they were all out on the terrace, Stephen nearly fell over the parapet. Two of the guests had to grab him.

'Better watch out for yourself in this house, Steve,' said Parker Barnes, an actor friend of Stephen's. 'It just might be jinxed.'

'What d'ya mean?' Stephen asked. 'I don't believe that for a minute. I may be an actor, but I haven't got a single superstition.'

'Oh, so you're an actor, Mr Castle!' a woman's voice said out of the darkness.
After the guests had gone, Stephen asked Olivia to come out again on the terrace.

'Maybe the air'll clear my head,' Stephen said, smiling. 'Sorry I was tipsy tonight. There's old Orion. See him?' He put his arm around Olivia and drew her close. 'Brightest constellation in the heavens.'

'You're hurting me, Stephen! Not so --' Then she screamed and squirmed, fighting for her life.

'Damn you!' Stephen gasped, astounded at her strength.

She twisted away from him and was standing near the bedroom door, facing him now. 'You were going to push me over.'

'No! Good God, Olivia! -- I lost my balance, that's all. I thought I was going over myself!'

'That's a fine thing to do, then, hold on to a woman and pull her over too.'

'I didn't realize. I'm drunk, darling. And I'm sorry.'

They lay as usual in the same bed that night, but both of them were only pretending to sleep. Until, for Olivia at least, just as she had used to tell Loren, sleep came around dawn.

The next day, casually and surreptitiously, each of them looked over the house from attic to cellar -- Olivia with a view to protecting herself from possible death traps, Stephen with a view to setting them. He had already decided that the cellar steps offered the best possibility, in spite of the duplication, because he thought no one would believe anyone would dare to use the same means twice -- if the intention was murder.

Olivia happened to be thinking the same thing.

The cellar steps had never before been so free of impediments or so well lighted. Neither of them took the initiative to turn the light out at night. Outwardly each professed love and faith in the other.

'I'm sorry I ever said such a thing to you, Stephen,' she
whispered in his ear as she embraced him. 'I was afraid on the
terrace that night, that's all. When you said "Damn you" –'
'I know, angel. You couldn't have thought I meant to hurt you.
I said "Damn you" just because you were there, and I thought I
might be pulling you over.'
They talked about another cruise. They wanted to go to Europe
next spring. But at meals they cautiously tasted every item of food
before beginning to eat.
How could I have done anything to the food, Stephen thought
to himself, since you never leave the kitchen while you're cooking
it.
And Olivia: I don't put anything past you. There's only one
direction you seem to be bright in, Stephen.
Her humiliation in having lost a lover was hidden by a dark
resentment. She realized she had been victimized. The last bit of
Stephen's charm had vanished. Yet now, Olivia thought, he was
doing the best job of acting in his life – and a twenty-
four-hour-a-day acting job at that. She congratulated herself that
it did not fool her, and she weighed one plan against another,
knowing that this 'accident' had to be even more convincing than
the one that had freed her from Loren.
Stephen realized he was not in quite so awkward a position.
Everyone who knew him and Olivia, even slightly, thought he
adored her. An accident would be assumed to be just that, an
accident, if he said so. He was now toying with the idea of the
closet-sized deep freeze in the cellar. There was no inside handle
on the door, and once in a while Olivia went into the farthest
corner of the deep freeze to get steaks or frozen asparagus. But
would she dare to go into it, now that her suspicions were
aroused, if he happened to be in the cellar at the same time? He
doubted it.
While Olivia was breakfasting in bed one morning – she had
taken to her own bedroom again, and Stephen brought her breakfast as Loren had always done – Stephen experimented with the door of the deep freeze. If it so much as touched a solid object in swinging open, he discovered, it would slowly but surely swing shut on its rebound. There was no solid object near the door now, and on the contrary the door was intended to be swung fully open, so that a catch on the outside of the door would lock in a grip set in the wall for just that purpose, and thus keep the door open. Olivia, he had noticed, always swung the door wide when she went in, and it latched on to the wall automatically. But if he put something in its way, even the corner of the box of kindling wood, the door would strike it and swing shut again, before Olivia had time to realize what had happened.

However, that particular moment did not seem the right one to put the kindling box in position, so Stephen did not set his trap. Olivia had said something about their going out to a restaurant tonight. She would not be taking anything out to thaw today.

They took a little walk at three in the afternoon – through the woods behind the house, then back home again – and they almost started holding hands, in a mutually distasteful and insulting pretence of affection; but their fingers only brushed and separated.

‘A cup of tea would taste good, wouldn’t it, darling?’ said Olivia.

‘Um-m.’ He smiled. Poison in the tea? Poison in the cookies? She’d made them herself that morning.

He remembered how they had plotted Loren’s sad demise – her tender whispers of murder over their luncheons, her infinite patience as the weeks went by and plan after plan failed. It was he who had suggested the carpet sweeper on the cellar steps and the lure of a scream from her. What could her bird-brain ever plan?
Shortly after their tea – everything had tasted fine – Stephen strolled out of the living room as if with no special purpose. He felt compelled to try out the kindling box again to see if it could really be depended on. He felt inspired, too, to set the trap now and leave it. The light at the head of the cellar stairs was on. He went carefully down the steps.

He listened for a moment to see if Olivia was possibly following him. Then he pulled the kindling box into position, not parallel to the front of the deep freeze, of course, but a little to one side, as if someone had dragged it out of the shadow to see into it better and left it there. He opened the deep-freeze door with exactly the speed and force Olivia might use, flinging the door from him as he stepped in with one foot, his right hand outstretched to catch the door on the rebound. But the foot that bore his weight slid several inches forward just as the door bumped against the kindling box.

Stephen was down on his right knee, his left leg straight out in front of him, and behind him the door shut. He got to his feet instantly and faced the closed door wide-eyed. It was dark, and he groped for the auxiliary switch to the left of the door, which put a light on at the back of the deep freeze.

How had it happened? The damned glaze of frost on the floor! But it wasn’t only the frost, he saw. What he had slipped on was a little piece of suet that he now saw in the middle of the floor, at the end of the greasy streak his slide had made.

Stephen stared at the suet neutrally, blankly, for an instant, then faced the door again, pushed it, felt along its firm rubber-sealed crack. He could call Olivia, of course. Eventually she’d hear him, or at least miss him, before he had time to freeze. She’d come down to the cellar, and she’d be able to hear him there even if she couldn’t hear him in the living room. Then she’d open the door, of course.
He smiled weakly, and tried to convince himself she would open the door.

'Olivia? – Olivia! I'm down in the cellar!' It was nearly a half hour later when Olivia called to Stephen to ask him which restaurant he preferred, a matter that would influence what she wore. She looked for him in his bedroom, in the library, on the terrace, and finally called out the front door, thinking he might be somewhere on the lawn.

At last she tried the cellar.

By this time, hunched in his tweed jacket, his arms crossed, Stephen was walking up and down in the deep freeze, giving out distress signals at intervals of thirty seconds and using the rest of his breath to blow into his shirt in an effort to warm himself. Olivia was just about to leave the cellar when she heard her name called faintly.

'Stephen?– Stephen, where are you?'

'In the deep freeze!' he called as loudly as he could.

Olivia looked at the deep freeze with an incredulous smile.

'Open it, can't you? I'm in the deep freeze!' came his muffled voice.

Olivia threw her head back and laughed, not even caring if Stephen heard her. Then still laughing so hard that she had to bend over, she climbed the cellar stairs.

What amused her was that she had thought of the deep freeze as a fine place to dispose of Stephen, but she hadn't worked out how to get him into it. His being there now, she realized, was owing to some funny accident – maybe he'd been trying to set a trap for her. It was all too comical. And lucky!

Or, maybe, she thought cagily, his intention even now was to trick her into opening the deep-freeze door, then to yank her inside and close the door on her. She was certainly not going to let that happen!
Olivia took her car and drove nearly twenty miles northward, had a sandwich at a roadside café, then went to a movie. When she got home at midnight she found she had not the courage to call ‘Stephen’ to the deep freeze, or even to go down to the cellar. She wasn’t sure he’d be dead by now, and even if he were silent it might mean he was only pretending to be dead or unconscious.

But tomorrow, she thought, there wouldn’t be any doubt he’d be dead. The very lack of air, for one thing, ought to finish him by that time.

She went to bed and assured herself a night’s sleep with a light sedative. She would have a strenuous day tomorrow. Her story of the mild quarrel with Stephen – over which restaurant they’d go to, nothing more – and his storming out of the living room to take a walk, she thought, would have to be very convincing.

At ten the next morning, after orange juice and coffee, Olivia felt ready for her role of the horrified, grief-stricken widow. After all, she told herself, she had practised the role – it would be the second time she had played the part. She decided to face the police in her dressing gown, as before.

To be quite natural about the whole thing she went down to the cellar to make the ‘discovery’ before she called the police. ‘Stephen? Stephen?’ she called out with confidence.

No answer.

She opened the deep freeze with apprehension, gasped at the curled-up, frost-covered figure on the floor, then walked the few feet toward him – aware that her footprints on the floor would be visible to corroborate her story that she had come in to try to revive Stephen.

Ka-bloom went the door – as if someone standing outside had given it a good hard push.

Now Olivia gasped in earnest, and her mouth stayed open. She’d flung the door wide. It should have latched on to the outside wall.
'Hello! Is anybody out there? Open this door, please! At once!'

But she knew there was no one out there. It was just some damnable accident. Maybe an accident that Stephen had arranged.

She looked at his face. His eyes were open, and on his white lips was his familiar little smile, triumphant now, and utterly nasty. Olivia did not look at him again. She drew her flimsy dressing gown as closely about her as she could and began to yell.

'Help! Someone! – police!'

She kept it up for what seemed like hours, until she grew hoarse and until she did not really feel very cold any more, only a little sleepy.
NOTES

sauce for the goose (title)
part of the saying ‘what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander’: what is suitable for one person (e.g. a wife) must also be suitable for another (e.g. a husband)

the Stock Exchange (p127)
a financial centre where stocks and shares are bought and sold

the Ides of March (p131)
15th March, according to the ancient Roman calendar, which was the day Julius Caesar was murdered (famous from the warning given in Shakespeare’s play Julius Caesar)

DISCUSSION

1 Why do you think the author chose this title for the story? Think of some other titles and decide if they are less, or more, appropriate than the original one.

2 There are various motives for murder in this story. Can you explain why Olivia arranged to kill Loren, why Stephen planned to kill Olivia, and why Olivia wanted to kill Stephen?

3 How and why did Stephen and Olivia die in the end? Did the ending surprise you? Did you find it shocking, or satisfying?

4 Do you feel sympathy for anyone in the story? Why, or why not?

LANGUAGE Focus

1 Look through the story and find these expressions, then rephrase them in your own words, keeping the sense of the original sentence.

what I’m getting at (p127)
he can take over for me (p127)
then gave it up (p127)
didn’t take to an idea (p127)
Loren did not come off so well there (p128)
talk it over (p128)
her appetite fell off (p129)