



# Vicious Lucius

George Barr McCutcheon

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PRESS



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Lucius Fry lived up back of the Power-house on the outskirts of Tinkletown. He had a wife, two children and a horse and buggy. For a great many years he had led a quiet, peaceful, even suppressed existence. Being a rather smallish, bony sort of man, with a large Adam's apple and bow legs, he was an object of considerable scorn not only to his acquaintances but to his wife and children, and after a fashion, to his horse.

The latter paid absolutely no attention to him when he said "Get-ap," or when he applied the "gad"; she neither obeyed the command nor resented the chastisement. She jogged along in her own sweet way quite as if he were nowhere in the vicinity. His wife abused him, and his children ignored him. No one, it would appear, had the slightest use or respect for Lucius Fry.

He was, by profession, a well-digger. The installation of a water-works system in Tinkletown had made him a well-digger in name only. For a matter of five or six years, barring the last six months, he had been in the employ of his wife. She took in washing, and it was his job to collect and deliver the "wash" three times a week. In return for this he received board and lodging and an occasional visit to the moving-picture theatre. One of his daughters clerked in the five-and-ten-cent store, and the other, aged twelve, was errand girl to Miss Angie Nixon, the fashionable dressmaker.

Lucius had married very much above him, so to speak. That is to say, his wife was something like nine or ten inches the taller of the two. When they appeared on the street together,—which was seldom,—you could see him only if you chanced to be on *that* side of her. Mrs. Fry was nearly six feet tall and very wide, but Lucius was not much over five feet two. He had a receding chin that tried to

secrete itself behind a scant, dun-colored crop of whiskers, cultivated by him with two purposes in view; first, to provide shelter for his shrinking chin, and second, to avoid the arduous and unnecessary task of shaving.

[Illustration: *When they appeared on the street together*]

Roughly speaking, Lucius was a shiftless creature. It had long been the consensus of opinion--freely expressed throughout Tinkletown--that he did not amount to a tinker's dam.

However that may be, some six or seven months prior to the incidents about to be related, Mr. Fry himself wrought a tremendous and unbelievable change in the foregoing opinion. Almost in the wink of an eyelash he passed through a process of transmogrification that not only bewildered him but caused the entire community to sit up and take notice of him.

It all came about in the oddest sort of way. For a number of years Lucius had been in the habit of currying the old grey mare on Saturday mornings. Away back in his mind lurked an hereditary respect for the Sabbath. He wanted old Peggy to be as clean as possible on Sunday--observing the same principle, no doubt, that induces a great many people to take a bath on Saturday night. Moreover, he changed the bedding in her stall on Saturdays, employing a pitchfork and a spade.

For a number of years Peggy had put up with these attentions, responding amiably to his directions--such as "Get over, dern ye," or "Whoa, back," "Stan' still, can't ye?" and so on.

One never-to-be-forgotten Saturday morning in the spring of the year, Peggy happened to be peevish. The cause of her peevishness was a swarm of intensely active flies. Mr. Fry was accustomed to an

occasional swish of her tail across his face. He even welcomed it, for the flies bothered him almost as much as they did Peggy. On mornings when he felt unusually tired, he was rather grateful to Peggy for including him in the sweep of her tail.

But on this particular morning the exasperated nag planted one of her hoofs on Mr. Fry's toes while he was engaged in brushing out the kinks in her mane.

Mrs. Fry happened to be in the stable at the time, seeing if the hens had mislaid anything in the hay. She was astonished by the roar of a mighty oath, followed almost instantly by a thunderous thump on the barrel-like anatomy of the family horse. A second or two later Peggy's head came in for a resounding whack, and the stream of profanity increased to a torrent.

Springing to her feet, the surprised lady cast a startled glance over the manger into the stall. Her husband had old Peggy backed up against the partition and was preparing to deliver a third blow with the spade when she called out to him: "Stop it, you little fool!"

Mr. Fry's attention was diverted. Peggy was spared the impending blow. Instead, the outraged hostler charged around the partition, through a narrow passage and into the presence of his wife. He hobbled painfully. Inarticulate sounds issued from his compressed lips. He gripped the spade-handle so tightly that cords stood out on his rather formidable forearms.

Mrs. Fry got as far as "You ugly little--" and then, as he bore down upon her, turned to flee. He altered his course, and as she passed him on the way to the open door, the flat of the spade landed with impelling force upon the broadest part of her person. The sound was not so hollow as that which resulted from the wallop on Peggy's ribs, but its echo was a great deal more far-reaching. Indeed, Mrs. Fry's

howl could have been heard a quarter of a mile away. She passed through the door into the barnyard on the wing, as it were.

[Illustration: *He altered his course, and as she passed him, the flat of his spade landed with impelling force*]

Lucius blindly took another swing at her with the spade as she made her exit. Missing her by several feet, he spun completely around several times with the momentum; then, not to be deprived of the full measure of triumph, he hurled the implement after her retreating figure. Rage improved the accuracy as well as the force of his effort. The spade caught Mrs. Fry below the waistline and for nearly a month thereafter she was in the habit of repairing with female visitors to an upstairs bedroom where she proudly revealed to them the extensive welt produced by her husband's belated return to power.

Not completely satisfied, however, he set out in pursuit of her, principally on one foot, but with a swiftness that surprised both of them. Overtaking her near the barnyard gate, he pulled up suddenly, realizing the peril of being too precipitate. He was rushing into disaster. She was likely to turn and snatch the offensive away from him. But just as he was on the point of turning to run the other way, she flopped down on her knees and began begging him for God's sake to spare her! Her eyes were tightly closed, and her arms were raised to shield her face.

Seizing this fine opportunity, he edged around in front of her, took the most careful, deliberate aim, and forthwith planted his fist solidly upon her unprotected nose.

He had always wanted to do it, but never before had the opportunity presented itself. He couldn't remember when he had caught her with her eyes closed before. She invariably stayed awake longer than he did at night, telling him the same thing she had told him the night

before, and in the morning she kicked him out of bed before his eyes were open. Now here was the golden, long-desired chance. It might never occur again. So he swung with all his might and main.

Mrs. Fry involuntarily arose from her knees, balanced on her heels for a second or two and then sat down some distance away with the same heels in the air.

Then and there Lucius Fry ceased to be a person of no consequence.

Two or three neighbours, bent on rescuing Mrs. Fry, got no nearer than the barn-lot fence. Lucius, still hopping around on one foot, gathered up a stick of stove-wood in each hand, and let fly at them with such determination and precision that they decided to let him go ahead and murder her.

When Mrs. Fry's daughters hurried into the house a short time afterward, they found their mother dressing and bandaging Mr. Fry's foot and chokingly inquiring if she was hurting him. Between sentences she applied a wet towel to a prodigious, unrecognizable object that had once been her nose.

Juliet, the elder, planted herself in front of her father and passionately inquired if it was true that he had dared to strike her mother.

Lucius, with rare forethought, had provided himself with a stick of stove-wood before entering the house. He now held it in his right hand. He was not going to take any chances on his wife's treachery. He was ready for the slightest sign of an uprising. Without answering his daughter's question, he took a firm grip on the stick and started to arise from his chair, upsetting the pail of water that his wife had been using. Mrs. Fry screeched.



"Don't hit her! Don't kill her, Lucius! For God's----"

"Shut up!" snarled Lucius. "I'm goin' to belt the life out of her if she comes around here disturbin' the peace. I'm peaceable now, Stella--we've got perfect peace now, ain't we? But if she tries to--Well, you'll see what'll happen, young lady. Go an' get a mop and clean up that water. D'ye hear me? Beat it!"

"For the Lord's sake, Juliet, do what he tells you," begged Mrs. Fry.

"An' do it *quick*," said Mr. Fry.

Having so suddenly--and unintentionally--gained the upper hand in his household, he was determined if possible to retain it. Temporarily at least he had his wife scared almost to death and so submissive that he couldn't think of half enough indignities to heap upon her, no matter how hard he tried; and his disdainful daughters spoke in hushed voices, and got up every morning to start the kitchen fire, and carried in the wood, and waited on him first at meals, and allowed him to read *The Banner* before any one else claimed it, and fed the chickens, and behaved as daughters ought to behave. It was too good to be true. But as long as it really appeared to be true, he couldn't afford to relax for an instant; he went about with a perpetual scowl and swore from morning till night.

Every other week he went out to the stable, and after closing the doors, proceeded to belabour an old saddle with a pitchfork handle. The sounds reaching the back porch of the house caused Mrs. Fry to cover her ears and moan: "Poor old Peggy! O-oh! My gracious! He'll--he'll kill her!"

Occasionally he threw a stove-lid or a hatchet or something else at his wife, but his aim was singularly bad, for try as he would, he did not appear to come closer than five or six feet to her with any of the

missiles. Once in a while he displayed the most appalling desire to destroy everything in sight. On such occasions he smashed chairs, broke up the crockery or tramped all over the garments that Mrs. Fry had just hung out to dry. By mistake, he once picked up a hot stove-lid, and then he swore in earnest. His dutiful wife wrapped his hand up in soda and called the stove-lid a "nasty old thing!"

In a very short time everybody in Tinkletown was talking about Lucius Fry. Some one, lying with a little more enterprise than the rest, started the report that he had gone to Boggs City, the county seat, and had thrashed a bartender who refused to sell him a drink. This report grew until Lucius was credited with having polished off a whole bar-room full of men without so much as sustaining a scratch himself.

When Lucius appeared on Main Street, men who had never noticed him before went out of their way to be polite and friendly. Women who pitied Mrs. Fry looked at him with interest and called him, under their breath, a "big ugly brute." Children stopped playing and ran when they saw Lucius Fry approaching.

Harry Squires, editor of *The Banner*, in reporting one of Mr. Fry's most violent eruptions, alluded to him as "vicious Lucius." The name clung to the little man. It was some time before the general public could utter it with confidence. Haste was not conducive to accuracy. Rash assuredness frequently turned Mr. Fry into "Vooshious Lishius" or "Lishius Vooshious" or even "V'looshious Ooshious."

Mrs. Fry, in course of time, grew to be very proud of her master, the despot of Power-house Gully. She revealed her pride every time she fell in with acquaintances on the way to church. In reply to an oft-repeated question as to why Mr. Fry did not go to church with her any longer, she invariably gave the supercilious reply that nowadays when she requested her husband to go to church, he told her to go to

hell instead--and that was the kind of a man she respected, she said, not one of your weak-kneed, henpecked cowards who go to church because they are more afraid of their wives than they are of the devil. And while the mountainous Mrs. Fry was no longer able to thrash her five-foot-two husband, she still inspired fear among churchgoers of both sexes and all ages. She frequently asserted that she could lick any man in Tinkletown except her husband--and moreover, if any officer of the law ever attempted to arrest Lucius for what he did to her, she'd beat his head off--that's what she'd do.

The marshal of Tinkletown, Anderson Crow, on three separate occasions organized a posse to go out to Power-house Gully to arrest Lucius on the complaint of neighbours who said they couldn't stand hearing his wife's howls any longer. On each of these occasions, the marshal got as far as the Fry front gate, backed by eight or ten of the huskiest men in town. There they were intercepted by Mrs. Fry, who told them that Lucius was upstairs peaceably reloading his double-barreled shotgun, or oiling up his trusty old horse-pistol, as the case may have been, and she didn't believe he would like to be disturbed.

"Is he ca'am an' quiet, Stella?" Marshal Crow would ask.

"As quiet as a lamb," Mrs. Fry would reply.

"Then I guess we'd better leave him alone," the Marshal would say, adding: "But if he ever goes on the rampage again, just you send for me, Stella, an' I'll come as quick as I can."

And the wife of Vicious Lucius would say: "Don't forget to bring the undertaker with you when you come, Anderson. You won't need a doctor."

At times Lucius would feel his courage slipping. At such times he

would go out to the barn and jostle old Peggy around in the stall, hoping against hope, but without the desired result. She simply *wouldn't* step on his foot.

One bitter cold night just before Christmas, a group of Tinkletown's foremost citizens sat around the big sheet-iron stove in Lamson's store. Outside, the wind was blowing a gale; it howled and shrieked around the corners of the building, banged forgotten window-shutters, slammed suspended signboards with relentless fury, and afforded unlimited food for reflection, reminiscence and prophecy. It was long past Mr. Lamson's customary hour for closing the store, but with rare tact the loungers permitted him to do most of the talking. It was nice and warm in the vicinity of the stove, and there were tubs of dried apples and prunes and a sack of hazel nuts within easy reach.

"I'll never forget the Christmas I spent out in Nebraska," Mr. Lamson was saying. He was probably the most travelled man in town. Every time he told a story, he went a little farther West. (Harry Squires disconcerted him on one occasion by asking in his most ironic manner if he didn't think it would be a good idea to settle in California when he got there, and Mr. Lamson, after thinking it over, stopped his subscription to *The Banner*.) "Yes sir; that was a terrible winter. I don't know as I ever told you about it, but we had to drive twenty-six miles in sleighs to get a tree on Christmas Eve. I mean a Christmas tree. The thermometer registered twenty-six below zero and—"

He was interrupted by the opening of the door. An icy draft swept down the length of the store.

"Shut that door!" roared out Marshal Crow.

But the door remained open. Whereupon every one craned his neck to see who was responsible. There was no one in sight.

"That's funny," said Newt Spratt. "I shut it tight when I came in awhile ago."

"Well, go and shut it again," ordered Mr. Crow. "Do you want us to freeze our ears right here in sight o' Jim Lamson's stove?"

Newt got up and kicked the door shut, saw that it was latched, and returned to his place near the stove. Marshal Crow, during his absence, had bettered his position. He had exchanged a seat on a box of soap for the cane-bottom chair Newt had been occupying.

"As I was sayin'," resumed Mr. Lamson, "the thermometer registered--"

Again the door flew open, banging against a barrel of sugar. With one accord the assembled group arose and peered at the open door.

"Well, now, that *is* funny," said Newt. "I latched her sure that time."

"Acts like ghosts," said Elmer K. Pratt, the photographer.

"If I was a drinking man," said Alf Reesling, the town drunkard, "I'd think I had 'em."

Marshal Crow stalked to the door, pulling his coat-collar up about his throat as he encountered the furious blast of the wind.

At the top of the steps leading up to the porch stood a small figure wrapped in a shawl. The light from within shone full upon the figure. It was that of a young girl, and she was looking intently up the street.

"Well, of all the--Say, don't you know it's after nine o'clock?" exclaimed the old Marshal. "What's a young girl like you doin' out this

time o' night?"

"Is--is that you, Mr. Crow?" quaked the girl without turning her head.

"It is. What's that got to do with it?"

"I--You don't see him anywheres up the street, do you?"

"Come inside if you want to talk to me. I ain't goin' to stand here in this door an' freeze to death. Come in here, I say."

"I dassent. Maybe he follered me."

"Maybe who follered you?"

"Him."

By this time several other customers had joined the Marshal.

"Why, it's Lucius Fry's girl Elfaretta," said Elmer K. Pratt. "What's the matter, Elfie?"

"You're sure he ain't follerin' me? Look hard," said the girl.

They all looked hard.

"I don't see anybody, Elfie," said Anderson Crow.

"It's a little early for Santa Claus," said Harry Squires, turning back to the stove, his eye on the only rocking-chair in the place. "Come inside and tell us all about it."

The girl entered the store, and some one closed the door. She was shivering, and not altogether from the cold. Her glance darted hither and thither, as if in quest of a more enduring protection than that

exemplified by the man-power surrounding her.

"Roll that barrel of sugar over against the door," she ordered quickly. "I wouldn't have him catch me here for anything."

"You needn't be skeered," said the Marshal. "Ain't we here? Let's see: there's one, two--eight of us. I guess--"

"He'd clean this bunch up as easy as rolling off a log," said Elfaretta, edging toward the fire, but all the while casting uneasy apprehensive glances over her shoulder.

Newt Spratt and Situate M. Jones jointly took it upon themselves to roll the barrel of sugar up against the door.

"Are you referring to your estimable dad?" inquired Mr. Squires from the rocking-chair.

"Yes, I am," said Elfaretta somewhat defiantly.

"Is he a little more vicious than usual tonight?" asked the reporter.

"He never was worse," said the girl. "He's just simply awful. I had to come out to see if I couldn't get Mr. Crow to come up to the house an'--an' settle him. He seen me just as I was going out the door, and took after me. Out by the front gate he slipped on the ice and set down like a ton of bricks. Oh, I never heard such cussing. You got to come up to the house right away, Mr. Crow. He's just terrible. He--"

"Hold on a minute," interrupted the Marshal. "Go slow, now, an' answer my questions. Is he--"

"He's throwing things around something awful. Ma's in the pantry with the door locked, and Juliet's hiding up in the--"

"I know all that," broke in Mr. Crow sharply. "You needn't tell me about that. What I want to know is, is he or is he not in his own house, under his own roof?"

"He is, unless he's still setting out there in the front yard--or follerin' after me," she concluded with a terrified look at the barricaded door. "Do you think that barrel's heavy enough to stop him?"

"Well, if he's inside his own house, I can't touch him without a warrant. You'll have to go an' swear out a search-warrant for him, Elfarette. It's against the law for me to arrest--"

"But ain't it against the law for him to be trying to murder Ma and Juliet and me?"

"There ain't no use arguing about it. I can't go an' get him without a warrant."

"You won't have to go in," said she confidently. "All you got to do is to let him know you're outside--anywheres--looking for him, and he'll come out; and he'll come without a warrant--you can bet your life on that, Mr. Crow. He says he's getting awful sick of having nothing to lick but women. He--"

"Did he say that?" demanded Marshal Crow, frowning and pulling at his whiskers.

"He put in some extra words, but I can't say 'em," said Elfaretta.

"I've a notion to--to--" began the Marshal in a somewhat bellicose manner, and then sadly shook his head. "No, it wouldn't be legal. I'm an officer of the law. But let me tell you one thing, Elfaretta Fry, if I *wasn't* an officer of the law, I'd take your dad by the back of the neck and shake him till his shoes flew off."



"We're getting away from the main issue," broke in Mr. Squires, the gadfly. "The point is, Anderson, are you going to let Vicious Lucius beat his family to death, or are you going up to the Gully and arrest him?"

The Marshal looked at Harry reproachfully. "You know I ain't empowered by law to enter a man's house without a warrant, Harry Squires."

"But the girl says you won't have to. She says her father will be only too glad to step outside."

"How do I know she's telling the truth about all this rumpus? She ain't under oath, is she? Well, there's got to be an affidavit, properly sworn to, before I do anything. It's the law, an' you know it. She may be lyin' like all get-out."

The girl flared up. "I'm going to tell Pa you called me a liar. He'll bust your jaw if--"

"I didn't *call* you a liar," snapped Anderson. "I only said *maybe* you're lyin'. I leave it to anybody here if I said you was a liar; an' besides, your pa ain't man enough to bust my jaw anyhow. You go home an' tell him I said--"

"Let's get the facts about this present embroglio, Anderson, before we make arrangements for another," put in Mr. Squires.

"I've no objection to that," said Anderson, a note of relief in his voice. "She can't swear out a warrant till tomorrow morning anyhow, so there's no particular hurry."

"But he's killin' Ma tonight!" burst in the girl.

"Keep cool now, my girl; don't get excited," cautioned the Marshal.

"What was he plannin' to kill her with? A gun?"

"No, sir. He had a hammer in one hand and a flatiron in the other, the last I saw of him."

"Well, go on--tell us all about it."

"It was awful sudden. We were all setting around the kitchen stove, and Pa was cracking hickory-nuts, just as nice and peaceful as anything. He was joking with Ma and telling her he couldn't help it if the women up our way were going plumb crazy over him--specially that Mrs. Banks, whose husband works at the tanyard. Every time Pa goes out in the back yard, she comes and leans on her fence and talks to him, making eyes and grinning like a cat. She's worse than Mrs. Elam Crippen and Mrs. Ducker--and Ma's been noticing it too. She's worried about Pa.

"Up to three months ago there wasn't a woman in town that'd look at him, and now they can't seem to look at anybody else. Mrs. Banks came out in her back yard yesterday and gave Pa a good pair of overshoes and a fur cap that belonged to her husband. Pa didn't want to take 'em, but she said she didn't care if Mr. Banks *did* get mad; he wasn't much of a man anyhow and she wouldn't take any back talk off'n him. Juliet heard Mrs. Crippen say to Pa the other day that if he'd give her one of his photographs, she'd be the happiest mortal alive. And Mrs. Ducker calls to see Ma nearly every washday now, just when she's busiest, and so Pa has to sit and entertain her.

"Yesterday a couple of women that Ma don't even know stopped out in front of the house and giggled at everything Pa said, and one of 'em said: 'Oh, you naughty man!' When Pa came into the house, Ma asked him what he was saying to those strange women that made 'em call him a naughty man, and Pa looked awful worried and wouldn't tell her. He said it wasn't his fault if women acted like fools.

He's all swelled-up, Pa is. Wears his best clothes every day and has taken to smoking cigarettes instead of a pipe when he's outside the house. Ma was counting up the other day just to see how much the cigarettes cost her, and--But that wasn't what I started to tell you. I--"

"I seen him walkin' down Cutler Street day before yesterday with a woman," said Alf Reesling. "Fat sort of a woman with a pink hat on."

"That's Mrs. Banks. She--"

"Never mind about Mrs. Banks," interrupted the Marshal. "Confine yourself to the evidence in this case, an' nothing else."

"Well, as I was saying, Pa was peaceful and quiet, cracking nuts on the flatiron. He got hold of a tough hickor'-nut, and it wouldn't crack very easy. So he had to hit it as hard as he could. Somehow he missed it, and smack went the hammer right on his thumb. My goodness! You'd ought to have heard him yell. He hopped up and began dancing around the kitchen, sucking his thumb and trying to swear with his mouth full. Ma says,--this is all she said,--Ma says: 'Did you hit your finger, Lucius?' Pa let fly the hammer. It didn't miss her head a foot. Then he fired the flatiron at her feet. Ma screamed and started to run to'ards the back stairs. Pa knocked over the kitchen table trying to head her off. She stumbled and fell down on her hands and knees. Then while he was looking for something to beat her brains out with, she got up and run into the pantry and locked the door.

"Juliet was squealing her head off. Pa picked up the hammer and started to'ard her. Juliet made a break for the stairs, and Pa let go with the hammer. He missed her, but he knocked a big hole in the ceiling. Then he grabbed the tea-kettle off the stove and threw it at the cat. He got some of the boiling water on his legs, I guess, because he grabbed 'em in his hands and yelled like an Indian. He

swore he'd kill everybody in the house. So I beat it. He was hunting for the flatiron and the hammer, and I was outside before he noticed me. I grabbed this old red tablecloth as I went out and put it around me. When I saw a light in your store, Mr. Lamson, I knowed Mr. Crow would be here, so up I came. Now, what are you going to do about it, Mr. Crow?"

The Marshal pondered. "You say your Ma's safely locked in the pantry?"

"She was--unless he busted the door down."

"And Julie is up in the attic?"

"Yes, and she's probably dead by this time. There ain't any lock on the attic door."

"Well, seems to me they're perfectly safe till morning. Julie could jump out of the attic window if the worst come to the worst. The thing that's worryin' me is you. Where are you going to sleep tonight, Elfie?"

"Right here in Mr. Lamson's rocking-chair," said the girl promptly.

"I'll take her up to my house," said Alf Reesling. "She can crawl in with my daughter Queenie."

"That's out of the question," said Harry Squires, arising and looking around for his overcoat. "We will need you, Alf. The Marshal is going to organize a posse and go up to Power-house Gully and capture Vicious Lucius dead or alive, before he's half an hour older."

"What's that?" demanded the Marshal, startled.

"You heard what I said. Get into your overcoats and goloshes,

gentlemen. The Marshal instructs me to say that we will be leaving here in five minutes."

"Well, I'll be dog-goned!" oozed from Marshal Crow's lips. He was staring quite hopelessly at Harry Squires.

"Isn't that a fact, Mr. Crow?" inquired Harry, fixing him with a most disconcerting look.

Anderson indulged in a short fit of coughing. "Yes," he said, after recovering himself, "*it is* a fact, but I'd like to know how you got onto it."

"I am a mental telegrapher, Mr. Crow," said the reporter, carefully placing a hat upon Mr. Reesling's head. "There's your hat, Alf. Now be sure and pick out a good coat."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Marshal's posse eventually resolved itself into a party of two--Anderson Crow and Harry Squires. Elmer K. Pratt remembered that his youngest child had the croup, and he couldn't leave her; Situate M. Jones complained of a sudden and violent attack of lumbago; Newt Spratt loudly demanded the flaxseed his wife had asked him to bring home so that she could make a poultice for a terrible toothache she was enjoying that evening; Alf Reesling refused to desert poor little Elfie; and two other gentlemen succeeded in sneaking out the back way while the Marshal's view was obstructed by the aforesaid slackers. Storekeeper Lamson had a perfectly sound excuse. He was a pacifist. However, he was willing to lend his revolver to the Marshal and a pair of brass "knucks" to Harry Squires.

Approaching Power-house Gully, the two adventurers observed shadowy forms moving about in the darkness at the foot of the slope.

They paused.

"Mostly women, I should say," remarked the Marshal.

"Probably hoping that Lucius is a widower by this time," said the reporter.

"So's they c'n send flowers an' victuals to him all the time he's in jail," said Anderson. "S'pose you go down an' talk to 'em, Harry, while I sneak around the back way and reconnoitre."

"That's a good idea," said Harry. "I'll just rush in through the front door, and he'll make a break to escape by the rear, so you'll be right there to head him off."

"Come to think of it," said Anderson hastily, "maybe we'd better see if he's out in the front yard first. Come on."

Eight or ten people were congregated in front of the Fry house, conversing in a hushed, excited manner. The Marshal and his companion bore down upon them. As the former had remarked, they were "mostly" women. There was but one man in the group. He turned out to be no other than Vicious Lucius himself.

[Illustration: *Eight or ten people were congregated in front of the Fry house*]

"What's this I hear about you, Lucius Fry?" demanded Anderson Crow.

"Don't you dare arrest Mr. Fry, Anderson Crow," cried one of the ladies. "He ain't done anything but give her what she deserves, and--  
--"

"Can I speak to you private, Mr. Crow?" interrupted Vicious Lucius in

a hurried manner. He was wearing an overcoat that came down to his heels, and a derby hat that rested rather firmly upon his ears.

Anderson stared at him in horror.

"Good gosh, Lucius, have you--have you had your hands cut off?" he gasped, looking hard at the flapping coat-sleeves.

"Course I ain't," said Mr. Fry, lifting his arms on high, allowing the sleeves to slip down a half a foot or more and revealing his hands. "This ain't my coat. It's Jim Banks'. A little too big fer me--and the hat too, I reckon."

"I just couldn't let him catch his death o' cold," explained the buxom Mrs. Banks.

"He just simply won't go back into the house," said Mrs. Ducker. "And I don't blame him, either. He's afraid he might throw her out of a window and--and break her neck, didn't you say, Lucius?"

"No, I didn't. I said I was afraid I'd break the winder," said Lucius, glaring at Mrs. Ducker from beneath the rim of Mr. Banks' hat.

"Where is your wife?" demanded Anderson.

"In there," said Lucius, pointing a drooping coat-sleeve in the general direction of his domicile. "Come on over here by the lamp-post, Mr. Crow. I got something important I want to say to you."

"You ain't going to give yourself up without a fight, are you, Lucius?" cried Mrs. Banks in considerable agitation.

"You leave me alone," snarled Lucius in a manner so malevolent that Mrs. Banks cried out delightedly:

"Oh, ain't he just grand? Did you hear the way he spoke to me, Emma Ducker? Goodness, what would I give if I had a man that could talk to me like--"

"You ought to heard what he said to me when I asked him to come over to our house and--" began Mrs. Ducker somewhat acrimoniously.

"Oh, cut it out--cut it out!" rasped Lucius. "Beat it! Go home, all of you! Gosh a'mighty, can't a feller lick his own wife without--Here! Leggo my arm! What in thunder are you tryin' to do, Lou Banks?"

"I'm going to take you over to my house and put your feet in a hot mustard bath, and--"

"No, you ain't! Leggo, I say! Fer the Lord's sake, Officer, chase 'em away!"

"Move on, now--move on, all of you," commanded the Marshal, waving the revolver in lieu of his well-known night-stick. "What you got to say to me, Lucius?" he asked as the women fell back.

"Do you think they c'n hear?"

"Not unless you whisper loudern' that."

"Well, say, I want you to do me a favour. I want you to take me up to the jail an' lock me in."

"You--you want to be locked in?"

"I don't care whether you put it that way er to lock all these fool women out. It's all the same to me. I ain't had a minute's peace for nearly two months. I--"



"Why don't you go in your own house an' stay there?" demanded Anderson.

"That don't seem to help any. They come to call on me so often you'd think I was a preacher or a doctor. An' what's more, my wife's beginnin' to get her dander up. I c'n see what's comin'. If she ever--gee, it will be awful!"

"Then you hain't murdered her yet? I understood you had."

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Vicious Lucius looked over his shoulder and drew closer to the Marshal.

"This here strain is gittin' to be too much fer me, Mr. Crow. I can't keep it up much longer. I'm breakin' down. I been thinkin' it over, an' I can't see any way out of it except to go to jail fer a month er two."

"What's the charge?" inquired Marshal Crow.

"There won't be any. I'll do it fer nothing. It won't cost you a cent to arrest me."

"That ain't what I mean. What I mean is what offence have you committed? What law have you broke?"

"Well, it's purty hard to say."

"What charge will your wife make ag'inst you? Somebody has to make one, you know."

"That's just it. She won't make any charge against me--positively not. So I've got to do it myself. You've had a lot of experience. What fer sort of a charge would you say I ought to bring?"

"Against yourself? It ain't regular, Lucius."

"How about insanity? Wouldn't that be a safe sort of complaint? I been actin' mighty queer lately."

"I should say you had. Ain't you goin' to resist arrest?"

"No, I'm askin' fer it. If you don't want to be seen walkin' through the streets with me, I'll go on ahead an' wait fer you at the jail."

"Well, this certainly beats all! I thought sure you'd put up an awful fight, Lucius."

"I want to be locked up so's I won't commit murder," Lucius explained eagerly.

"Good gracious! You come along with me, Lucius Fry. You got to be put under lock an' key 'fore this night is over. I can't take no chances on your murderin' that pore defenceless wife of your'n. You come--"

"I ain't thinkin' of murderin' my wife," protested Lucius, holding back. "What I'm scared of is I'll murder one or two of these pesky women--that Banks woman, fer instance. It's gittin' so I can't stick my nose outside the door 'thout her droppin' everything an' runnin' out to gab with me. I don't get a minute's privacy. If it ain't one, it's another. You'd think I was Napoleon Bonaparte, the way them women act. I don't know what's come over 'em."

"Why, it's just 'cause they think you can lick any man in town. That's the way with some women. The more brutal a man is to his own wife, the more the other women seem to appreciate him. I must say, it takes a purty good man to lick that wife of your'n--she's twice as big as you are, and--"

"Why, gosh dern it, Mr. Crow, I couldn't lick Stella in a million years," whispered Lucius fiercely.

"What's that? You--you say you can't lick your wife?"

"*I should say not!*" exclaimed Mr. Fry, raising his voice in earnestness. Instantly he lowered it, standing on his tip-toes the better to impart the following information to the amazed Marshal: "She can lick me with both hands tied behind her back. Nobody knows it better'n I do. I just got to keep throwin' things at her an' cussin' an' smashin' furniture, an' all that, 'cause if she ever got an idea how scared I am of her, she'd pick me up by the seat of my pants an'--Oh, I tell you it's gettin' to be more'n I c'n stand, Mr. Crow. It's mighty hard to keep on thinkin' you got to keep on bein' brave when you're scared plumb to death all the time. Why, if Stella ever got onto the fact that I--"

"But you keep on beatin' her just the same, don't you?"

"I never beat her unless her back's turned. First I throw somethin' at her. That's the best way. But you never ought to throw anything unless you got somethin' ready in the other hand. *An' hang onto that until you're sure she's not goin' to run to'ards you 'stead of the other way.* If you're goin' to be a successful wife-beater, you got to use an awful lot of common-sense." He looked over his shoulder. "Come on up the street a little ways, Mr. Crow," he said nervously. "Them fool women are edgin' nearer all the time. Next thing you know, they'll be tryin' to sick me onto you, an'--an' I'd have to make good. They got all their husbands scared of me, an' they keep tellin' me that I'm the grandest little man in the world. You know Jim Banks? Well, he's twice as big as I am. A week or two ago he came out on his back porch an' called me a name. I started over to apologize to him, but he thought I was comin' *after* him, so he jumped back in the kitchen an' slammed the door. She told me he wanted to send fer you, Mr. Crow.

"I wish he had."

"I understand you been makin' threats about what you'd do to me if I ever tried to arrest you," said Anderson sternly. "Is that true?"

"No, it ain't. My wife's been makin' all the threats. She don't make any bones about what *she'll* do to you if you ever try to arrest me. She says she'll bust your head fer you."

Marshal Crow straightened up and glared at the Fry habitation. There was a light in the kitchen window.

"You wait here, Lucius Fry, an' don't move till I come back. I'm going in there an' talk to that wife o' yours."

"You better take a gang o' men with you. Remember, I'm givin' you fair warnin'. She'll eat you alive."

"I'll take my friend Mr. Squires with me fer a witness--that's all. Is she out in the kitchen?"

"I don't know. I ain't been in the house since the row. She locked the door on me."

The Marshal strode away, leaving Vicious Lucius to the mercy of the women. Harry Squires was nowhere in sight. Mr. Crow looked about in some alarm. His speed noticeably decreased. Fumbling in his coat pocket, he found his police whistle and proceeded to blow a shrill blast upon it. A few moments passed, and then Harry came hurrying around the corner of the house.

"Where have you been, dern you?"

"I've been in the house chatting with Mrs. Fry," said the reporter.

"Is she conscious? Is she able to talk?"

"She certainly is. Come on. She wants to see you."

Harry Squires grasped his arm and led him toward the kitchen door. Mrs. Fry herself admitted them. She looked most formidable.

"Did my daughter Elfaretta ask you to come here and interfere with my private affairs, Anderson Crow?" she demanded.

"I am not supposed to answer questions like that, Mrs. Fry," said Anderson with dignity. "I am pleased to inform you, however, that I have succeeded in arrestin' your husband, an' I intend to see to it that he is locked up fer--"

"Oh, my goodness!" groaned the gigantic lady, dropping suddenly into a chair and lowering her face into her apron.

The Marshal looked at her in astonishment.

"You have got to release Vicious Lucius at once," said Harry Squires sternly. "We can't afford to wreck this poor little woman's life."

"Little--what's that you said?" stammered the Marshal, still gazing at the ponderous bulk in the chair.

"You heard what I said--wreck this poor but proud lady's life. Speak up, Mrs. Fry. Tell the good Marshal all about it."

Whereupon the woebegone Mrs. Fry lifted her head and her voice in lamentation.

"I knew it couldn't last. I might 'a' knowed something would turn up to spoil it. It was too much to expect. Oh, if you only wouldn't lock him up, Mr. Crow! What will people say when they find out you was able

to arrest him single-handed, without a gang o' men to help you? Oh, oh, oh!"

Mr. Squires interposed a suggestion just as she was on the verge of sobs.

"I dare say we could stage a perfectly realistic struggle between Mr. Fry and Mr. Crow. Mr. Fry could trip Mr. Crow up--all in play, you know; and then I could rush in and grab Mr. Fry from behind while he was letting on as though he was kicking Mr. Crow in the face. The spectators would--"

"I won't be a party to any such monkey business!" exclaimed the Marshal in some heat. "What do you take me for? If I arrest Lucius Fry, I'll jest simply pick him up by the coat-collar and--"

"That's just it," cried Mrs. Fry. "He wouldn't fight back, and how would I feel if you carried him off to jail as if he was a lunch-basket? And I was beginning to feel so proud and happy. I was getting so I could look those cats in the face, all because my husband was the best little daredevil in the Gully. They used to pity me. Now they are so jealous of me they don't know what to do. They'd give anything if they had a husband like Lucius--little as he is. My, how they envy me, and how I have been looking down on all of 'em the last six months! And here you arrest him as easy as if he was a little girl, when I been telling everybody there wasn't anybody living that could take my man to jail. Oh, I--I wish I'd never been born!"

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Anderson Crow was puzzled. He pulled at his whiskers in the most helpless way, and stared wide-eyed.

"But--but ain't you afraid to live with him?" he mumbled. "Ain't you

afraid he'll lick you to death sometime when he's in one of--"

"He couldn't lick me if I was chloroformed," blurted out Mrs. Fry, arising suddenly. She bared a huge right arm. "See that? Well, that's as big as his leg. Don't you ever get it in your head that I can't lick Lucius Fry. That ain't the point. I can do it, but I wouldn't do it for anything on earth. I want to be proud of him, and I want these other women to feel sorry for me because I've got a *man* for a husband, and not a rabbit. Where is he, Mr. Crow?"

"He's out there waitin' fer me to take him to jail--that is, he *said* he'd wait. Course, if you won't make any affidavit ag'inst him, I--I guess there's no sense in me lockin' him up. I was doin' it as a--er--as a sort of favour to him, anyhow. He seemed to be afraid he'd kill some of them women that hang around him."

"I just thought he'd act that way. I won't make any charge against him. I want him to stay just the way he is--a fine, upstanding brutal sort of feller. You go out there an' tell him to come in here. I want to go down on my knees again and forgive him."

The Marshal hesitated. He was between two fires. He couldn't very well oblige *both* of them. Lucius unquestionably was eager to go to jail for reasons of his own, and Mrs. Fry was just as eager that he should remain at large. The Marshal scratched his head.

"I feel kinder sorry fer him," he mused. "Like as not, one of them women will git so foolish over him that her husband will take it into his head to get a divorce, an'--" He paused in confusion.

"Go on--go on!" pleaded Mrs. Fry, her eyes sparkling.

"Well, from all Lucius says, he despises the whole lot of 'em. Still, that ain't goin' to help *him* any if Jim Banks er one of them other

idiots gits all het up an' jealous an' goes and sues fer a divorce, namin' Lucius Fry as--"

Mrs. Fry slapped him violently on the back.

"That's just what I want!" she cried eagerly. "I'd be the proudest woman in Tinkletown."

The Marshal stared. Harry Squires covered his mouth with his hand.

"Well, of all the gosh--"

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His ejaculation was cut short by the opening of the kitchen door. Lucius stood outlined in the aperture. He was clapping his arms about his body, and his teeth were chattering. The voluminous sleeves flapped like great limp wings.

"Say," he whined, "I can't wait out there all night in this kinder weather. If I got to go to jail, I want to do it right away. It's cruelty to animals to leave me standin' out there with nothing on my feet but carpet-slippers. Come on an'--"

"Come in to the fire an' get warm, Lucius dear," called out his wife, as shrinking and as timid as a whipped child. "I forgive you. Julie! Julie! Come down here an' help me get some hot coffee an' something to eat fer your Pa."

"I--I guess we'd better be goin', Harry," said Marshall Crow uncomfortably. "I got to disperse that crowd o' women out there in the street. Good night, Lucius. Night, Mrs. Fry. If you ever need me, all yer got to do is just send word."

Lucius followed him to the door, and would have gone out into the



night with him if the Marshal had not deliberately pushed him back.

"You--you ain't goin' to desert me, are you?" whispered Lucius fiercely.

The Marshal leaned over and whispered to Lucius.

"If all the other men in this here town had as soft a snap as you've got, Lucius Fry, they'd hate to die worse'n ever, because they'd know they'd never git back into heaven ag'in."

[The end]

George Barr McCutcheon's short story: Vicious Lucius