

Even Up by

Dale M. Brown



FLATIRON CASEY, resplendent in brand-new apparel, alighted from the train, and, suitcase in hand, darted through the station and out to the street.

Flatiron's face was whiter than of old, but it was just as good to look at; and his smile was exuberant.

"Hey, kid," he yelled to a newsy, "where's the show lot?"

The boy told him and he swung jauntily along the street to a corner and boarded a car. It was only a short ride, and when at last the gleaming tents of the "World's Greatest" came in sight, he swung off.

Walking hurriedly to a point opposite the entrance of the "Big top," he stopped to feast his eyes on the old familiar sight, much as does a lad who returns to the old home after a long absence.

"Three years!" Flatiron muttered. "Three whole years! Say, old kid, don't she look good, though?"

It was a bare half-hour till the start of the afternoon performance. The gathering crowd was wandering aimlessly along the

midway, and sidling around the show lot to gaze at what might be seen of the "back door," and its adjuncts, the dressing tents.

Over in the "band top," the fly of which swung open. Flatiron could see red-coated figures and hear the discordant sounds of instruments that later would blend into a harmonious crashing "entry."

The coon band in the "kid show" was already at it. At its best it sounded little better than the mere practice of the "big show's" musical organization.

Husky, leather-lunged "barkers" along the midway bellowed or rasped through monstrous megaphones. Street men, burdened with toy balloons, pennants, or other souvenirs, mingled with the crowd and hoarsely blatted their wares.

From the "privilege" tent, near the front door of the big show, came the yelps of the stand "butchers" in endeavors to separate the hungry or thirsty from nickels or dimes; in return for "Lemo! Lemo! Five a glass! She's ice cold, boys!" or peanuts, or the equally ancient refreshment, "Hot buttered popcorn," which, by the way, was neither hot nor

battered.

Flatiron caught a glimpse, through the throng, of two “candy butchers,” whom he had known in the past, and who now were preparing for the afternoon business in the big top.

“Hot dog” and ice-cream men interjected their tones into the general bedlam. And as a crowning touch to the din, the bulldogs, terriers, and English whippets, caged in the dog wagon near the band top, began a yelping chorus of challenge to a bedraggled Irish terrier that sat calmly on its haunches and barked back at them half heartedly.

It was the same del game, thought Flatiron, but more attractive than ever. He fairly hugged himself with the joy of getting back to it; it was like coming home!

Finally he crossed the street and made his way past the “spec” top, the band top, and to the very door of the men’s dressing-tent, where he dropped his suitcase, grinned broadly and hollered at Jimmy Brown, who, astride of his trunk, was making up for the performance.

Jimmy looked up wonderingly, stared a moment, and hurled himself, grease paint and all, at young Mr. Casey.

“Why, you darned little mick!” he howled. “Where you been keepin’ yourself? Shake, kid, shake.”

Then, turning his head, he shouted lustily:

“Look who’s here, folks! Pipe him, will you? The old original joy bird has come back!”

To Flatiron it seemed the most wonderful moment of his life. In years past, he had been the life of the World’s Greatest, and his friends were beyond counting. In the old days, when troupers, “kinkers,” as they are known, had become ennuied with the life they led, they had merely sent out an SOS for Flatiron; he was a great little antidote.

So the welcome from the old crowd

was hearty, and it warmed his heart wonderfully.”

“Where’s the ‘old man’?” he asked, when he had greeted every one in sight. “I’m lookin’ for a job, take it from me!”

He found the old man just inside the back door of the big top, and touched him on the arm.

“For the love o’ Pete, put me to work, will you?” he pleaded.

The eyes of the old man twinkled when he looked down and espied Flatiron; but he merely grunted and told that young gentleman that he had no time to waste on a guy that couldn’t do a blasted thing but clown and ride flat races, and why the hell didn’t he see Jules and quit bothering him?

Young Mr. Casey grinned impertinently and did as he was told—and old Jules welcomed him with open arms, as the old man had known he would. In the world of fun-makers there is a pinnacle of eminence, astride which sat old Jules, producing clown, with Flatiron dangling just beneath him. And from the standpoint of both Jules and the old man, the acquisition of young Mr. Casey was very desirable.

So in this fashion Flatiron came back to the life he loved, and before the night few was as much at home as though he had been with the “trick” all season.

It was while he was at supper the first night, that a thought, bothering him all afternoon, found vent in a question to Patsy, the cook-shack boss

“Say, Patsy,” he blurted, “where’s Miss La Verne?”

Patsy grinned wickedly.

“She’s sick—laid up in her berth,” he said. “And if she wasn’t, it ain’t likely she’d want you botherin’ her.”

“Say that again,” Flatiron demanded. “Say it slow this time.”

Patsy complied, and added the information that much as Miss La Verne may

have cared for young Mr. Casey in days gone by, she seemed to have entirely forgotten him and become interested in a likely lad by the name of Riley Magee.

“And who the devil is Riley Magee?” Flatiron wanted to know.

“A kinker what was on here last season an’ part o’ this,” said Patsy. “He blowed, but she seems to be waitin’ fer him patiently.”

That spoiled young Mr. Casey’s appetite. He got up abruptly and wandered out back of the band top, where he lay down and brooded over what Patsy had said, and smoked a good many cigarettes.

For several days, while Miss La Verne kept to the cars. Flatiron was blue and morose. And on the afternoon on which she appeared on the lot, he kept as far away from her as possible. He did not want to do so: he wanted to rush to her and take both of her hands in his, and feast his eyes on her to his heart’s content. But Patsy had spoiled all that for him, and he determined that if any advances were made, Miss La Verne would make them—he’d be darned if he would!

The lady, totally unaware of Flatiron’s frame of mind, or the reason for it, finally caught sight of him as he was rounding the dressing-tent. She halted abruptly, gasped, and started after him.

Flatiron turned when she called his name, and had the grace to flush slightly at the guilty knowledge that he had been trying to evade her.

“Hello, Flat!” cried Miss La Verne, holding out her hands and smiling as no other woman in the world could smile.

“How’s everything and when did you come up, and why haven’t you been in to see me?”

“Shoot ‘em one at a tome,” laughed Mr. Casey. “Gee, it’s good to look at again, Daisy. Oh, I’ve been loafin’ two, three four years. I couldn’t get it out o’ my blood, though, so I come back last week. Heard you

was sick and thought perhaps I didn’t have no call to butt in.”

“Butt in?” Miss La Verne raised her eyebrows and stared peculiarly at Flatiron, who flushed and looked at his feet. “Oh, well, of course—”

“Now, listen, Daisy,” protested young Mr. Casey. “Patsy told me that—that—well, about a guy named Magee; and I didn’t want to bother you, you see, unless—”

The smile returned to Miss La Verne’s countenance.

“Well, you did treat me pretty rough, you know, Flat. Three years—and not a word after the first month! I didn’t think you’d do it. But let’s forget it, both ways. We can be almost as good pals, can’t we—and Riley Magee—”

“Ah, don’t rub it in!” Flatiron protested. “I had a reason and why, sure we can be pals; the best ever. By the way, Daisy, ever hear of a kinker named Meakin—Jim Meakin?”

Miss La Verne wrinkled her brows thoughtfully.

“Meakin? No, I don’t think so. Flat. Why?”

“Aw, nothin’. I’m just lookin’ for him, that’s all. He told me he’d trouped wunst on a time. I got some bone to pick with that baby, believe me!”

The girl was silent for a moment, then she asked:

“Where have you been, Flat? You didn’t tell me. You look—oh, you look awfully white and pinched, somehow. Where were you?”

Young Mr. Casey glanced sharply at her, and his lips seemed to draw inward, leaving a mere slit for a mouth.

“Me? Oh, I been knockin’ around. I—well, I ain’t been feelin’ well.”

And that was all that Miss La Verne or any one else learned from him as to where he had spent the years or why his face was so

pasty-looking. Also, although he made a number of inquiry's about a certain Jim Meakin, no one could learn the exact nature of his declared feud with that individual.

In the course of a short lime, matters between Miss La Verne and Flatiron assumed such proportions that the crowd began to sit up and take notice. The two were almost as intimate as they had been three years before; and the curious ones began to wonder.

"I think she's a darned flirt, like the most of 'em," was Jimmy Brown's declaration to old Jules. "Here she goes first and makes everybody think she's about to go into double with Flat, and then Flat blows and Magee gets in an innin', and she don't look at nobody; not till Flat comes back, so we all thinks she's waitin' for Riley. But now—but now—well, say, how you got it doped out, anyhow?"

That was as far as any one got with speculation. Miss La Verne and Flatiron hoed their own rows and paid no heed to either jibes or queries.

Then one day, Snake Eddy, who had been over on the Barling show all season, joined on with the World's Greatest and got in hot water before night.

It happened that Flatiron was sunning himself that afternoon on the bank of a creek that gurgled past the lot. Just in back of him was the band top; and on the other side of the band top were Miss La Verne and Snake Eddy. Snake had cornered her there.

When Flatiron caught the tone of Snake's voice, he sat up straight, threw his cigarette away, and hunched his shoulders.

"What's the use o' that stall with me, Daisy?" were the words of Snake. "I tell you I seen Riley—and he ain't waitin' for you, if you are for him: not at all! He laughed when I mentioned you to him."

"I didn't tell you I was waiting for him, Snake." was Miss Daisy's cool retort. "You take too much for granted. Anyway, Riley wouldn't tell you the truth; he'd know

you couldn't appreciate it. Run along and let me alone!"

Now, on the big show, if a man is wise, he acquires the habit of taking a hint readily. Not only that; he abides by the courtesy of circus life, which is about the strictest of any on the face of the globe—for the simple reason that it has to be, if the show retains a decent reputation and gets the money. The old man prided himself on that sort of an aggregation—and if you didn't like it, you could draw your money and get off!

Snake knew all this, but it must have slipped his mind for the moment.

"All right, if you want it that way!" he snarled. "But take it from me, girly, if Flat knew as much about you as me and Riley does, he wouldn't be no such mama's darling with you as he is now!"

That was quite enough for young Mr. Casey. Like a hurricane he came around the corner of the band top and descended on Snake before that astonished young man could find time to fight, or to flee from the impending doom. The Irish fists of Flat-iron shot out in one-two fashion, one of them driving Snake's nose nearly through his face, and the other burying itself, somewhere in his midsection.

Deciding that discretion was the belief part of valor. Mr. Eddy doubled up with a groan and lay down. And Flatiron, after one contemptuous look at the prostrate form, turned to Miss La Verne, who was smiling strangely.

"If he bothers you again, Daisy, just whistle," commanded Flatiron, and was about to depart when she grasped his arm and swung him about.

"You—you heard?" she asked tensely.

Young Mr. Casey nodded.

"And—you believe—"

"Not on your life," grinned Flatiron.

"Come on; let's go over here and sit down."

When they had gone, Snake got to his

feet and crept away to the animal tent. Snake was only assistant to Smithy, boss animal man, anyway, and should have known better than to attempt an intimacy with Miss La Verne, an aerial artist of some small repute.

In reality, the assistant boss animal man did not know just how matters stood with the girl and Riley Magee. But he took a chance and wrote a carefully-worded letter to Riley not forgetting to mention that Miss La Verne was pining away; and that a certain party whose name Snake wouldn't mention was altogether too "thick" with the girl. Snake intimated that Miss Daisy wished that Mr. Magee would come back and trounce the interloper; she was being pestered to death!

Snake was not without a certain cunning. He knew Riley for a rather egotistical young man, who prided himself on his "lady-killing" ability. He knew, also, that Riley packed a mighty hard "kick in his mitt," because he had experienced it.

In fact, Snake cared little who got killed in the rumpus, so long as there was a mix-up of some character. It would very likely stir up a small scandal about the girl who had scorned him, and get both her and Flatiron fired from the show.

Which proved that Snake knew the old man pretty well, but was greatly deceived as to Miss La Verne.

Over back of the band top. Flatiron and the girl sat on the creek bank, busy with thoughts that could not be expressed to one another. Finally Flatiron broke the silence.

"Daisy," he said. "I had the idea in my head once that perhaps you and me would—well—aw, shucks! you know how I felt about it, don't you? And I ain' changed my opinion none, take it from me!"

Miss La Verne looked up quickly and met his glance. It seemed to him that her eyes were—well—not quite so dry and snappy as usual.

"Flat, if you'd put the question to me

before you left, three years ago, I might have said 'yes.' And up to—well, up to the last few minutes I think it would have been the same; but not now. I say I think it would—because I was undecided just how I felt. Now I know that it's no go, ever; and I'm sorry—really I'm sorry."

Flatiron didn't say anything for several moments. He rolled a cigarette and sat gazing off across a pasture.

"Is it—Riley Magee?" he asked at length.

Miss La Verne drew a quick breath and caught her lower lip between her teeth—a bit of by-play that Flatiron missed.

"Yes," she said softly, "It's Riley Magee. Don't ask me any more, Flatiron—please."

She got to her feet and turned to leave him but thought of something else.

"If you can," she said, "I wish you'd forget this and be just as we—we have been. I'd like it, Flat."

Then she was gone and young Mr. Casey lay on his back and pondered many things, among them various methods of suicide. Riley Magee was certainly a lucky devil, and he, Flatiron, would like nothing better than to meet him and literally beat him to a pulp.

Despite Miss La Verne's plea. Flatiron avoided her for a week. He felt that he could not continue the old relationship—the "pal" business. It was too painful.

Of course, the girl noticed his attitude, and in the solitude of her berth, indulged in two or three crying spells. Popular opinion to the contrary, circus women are no better and no worse than others, and they endure the same emotions that come to they city sisters.

Daisy wanted to go to Flatiron and unburden her soul to him; but she didn't do so. She kept to herself and suffered fully as much as young Mr. Casey.

Then, on the day that Flatiron decided

to jump the show and join on with another "trick," fate decided that it was time to take a hand in the little drama.

The night performance was on, and Flatiron whose cue was a half-hour distant, sprawled on the grass behind the dressing tent. Over to the left was the deserted band top; at least, Flatiron supposed it deserted—until the angry tones of a man and the spirited rejoinder of a woman floated out to him.

The woman was Miss La Verne, undoubtedly; and the man—the man—well, something about his voice caused Flatiron to sit up very straight and stare toward the band tent.

Suddenly a man swung from the rear flap of the tent and hurried away. Then Miss La Verne came out and hastened toward the dressing-tent. A few feet from Flatiron she stopped, stared and descended upon him eagerly.

"Flat!" she gasped. "I—I've got something to tell you. I must tell you!"

"Go to it, then," was Flatiron's advice; and the girl dropped to the ground beside him.

"Flatiron, Riley Magee's here," she went on breathlessly. "Snake wrote him a lot of stuff about us—about you and me—and he—well, he's threatened me with—with—"

She floundered hopelessly and young Mr. Casey stared in amazement.

"Well, good Lord!" he retorted. "You can easy fix that with him, can't you?"

"But I—I don't want to!" moaned Miss La Verne. "I detest him, Flat! I hate him!"

"Hate him! What for? I thought you told me—"

"I told you he was the reason I couldn't marry you," snapped the girl impatiently. "I didn't mean the thing you thought I meant, by a long shot. I want to tell you."

"Well, shoot it, if it'll make you feel better," was Mr. Casey's advice."

"Flat, I liked you a lot," the girl hurried on. "But I was young, and when Riley came along I made a fool of myself over him. We were to be married and—well, Flat, you'll find plenty of folks to tell you appearances—"

"I get you," cut in Flatiron, "an' I ain't no angel myself. But listen, Daisy! There's goin' to be a busted face if anybody tells me that!"

Miss La Verne allowed herself a rather wan smile.

"That's why I couldn't marry you," she said. "If I didn't tell you, you might find out afterward—and I know what a jolt that would be. And if I told you—well, even if you wanted me, you couldn't get that thought out of your mind—not entirely. It wouldn't be a square deal for either of us.

"If we could only start off even!—but I knew that you never turned a crooked trick in your life. If you had, I'd have said 'yes' in a minute. Then we could start on the same level—even up. You see what I mean?"

Young Mr. Casey seemed to have lost the power of speech. He merely stared at her, a peculiar look in his eyes that made her nervous.

"And now," continued Miss Daisy, "he's going to murder you—after he tells you what sort of a creature I am, I suppose. He thought I'd go away with him, and when I told him what I thought of him he got mad as the dickens. He's after you with blood in his eye—and I'm afraid; honest I am, Flat!"

The power of speech came back to Flatiron slowly, and he astonished Miss La Verne by preceding his utterance with a grin that reached across his face.

"So you thought you wasn't good enough, hey?" he inquired. "You thought Flat was a little tin god what had a right to blame you for a slip, did you? You wished we could start even up: begin over again together and start off fresh? Is that the idea? Well, we can't! Listen, Daisy. I'm so low down, stacked

up alongside o' you that I can't see the top button o' your shoe by stretching me neck!"

Miss La Verne was staring in dumb amazement, and Flatiron paused to roll a cigarette.

"I don't—I—what do you mean?" stammered the girl.

"Daisy, you remember how pale I was when I come back? And you recollect my mentionin' a guy by the name o' Meakin—Jim Meakin? Well, I'll tell you—"

And then he broke off abruptly and sat staring at a man approaching the glare from a chandelier on the privilege wagon. A second later, as the man stepped into the radiance, Flatiron leaped to his feet.

"Back in a minute," he grunted. "Wait for me, will you?"

Then he tore across the lot, and Miss La Verne, watching intently, saw him grasp the stranger's arm and swing him about.

After that, she hardly knew what occurred. She heard an oath escape the man and she heard a peculiar laugh from young Mr. Casey—a laugh with no mirth in it, but a good deal of deadly menace. And the-next thing she knew. Flatiron hurled himself through the air, and the two went to the ground together.

The man was larger than Flatiron—which fact did not seem to bother young Mr. Casey in the least. It was evident that he was having things his own way and rather enjoying them; and it was but a short tune until he got to his feet and stood menacingly over his victim.

"Had enough?" he inquired. "For this time, that is. Because every time I get a look at your phiz from now until death do us part, I'm goin' to beat it to a jelly!"

Apparently the victim was quite satisfied; and young Mr. Casey grinned, leaned over and grabbed him by the collar.

"Come on, then." he commanded, yanking the other half erect. "Get on your

trilbies and come on. You ain't goin' to sneak out o' here until you prove somethin' to a certain party, for me."

In the shadow of the dressing tent, where Miss La Verne sat, it was quite dark; and it was not until Flatiron and the man he had subdued were fairly upon her that the latter tried to jerk away. Young Mr. Casey doubled a freckled fist and planted it none too gently back of the refractory one's ear.

"If I have to kill you, I'll do it," he declared firmly, "but not till I get this here job over with."

Miss La Verne came to her feet with a stifled cry.

"Wait a minute, Daisy," grinned Flatiron. "I'll tell you that story now. Funny this guy happened along just in time to tell you I ain't lyin', ain't it?"

"You knew I had a mother, didn't you? Sure! Well, she was pretty sick—that's why I blowed. I got a hurry-up from the doc. He told me the old lady'd have to have an operation—a stiff one—and I'd have to keep her in a sanitarium two three months. That meant a large wad, and I didn't have none.

"Then I met a guy named Jim Meakin. He showed me how to get it, easy. It was crooked, but it was for her, see? I had to have it! We got it all right; and they got me. But I had time to slip this here Meakin the dough, and he promised to get it to me mother and see that she got fixed up.

"I went to 'stir,' but that was all right, 'cause the old lady would be waitin' for me, all well again, when I come out. Get it?"

"Well, when I come out, daisy, she wasn't waiting. She was—she'd gone—died—see? This Meakin double-crossed me; he never went near her.

"I was thinkin' o' that when you was tellin' me. I slid over because I—well, I thought a heap o' the old lady; and y—that girl you was telling me about, she slipped cause she thought a heap of a no-good guy

that ain't going to get away from me without a beatin' when I meet up with him. That sorta makes it an even up deal, don't it?

"Anyway, thus guy here is Jim Meakin, Daisy; and what I give him to-night is just a synopsis o' what he's got comin' to him!"

Young Mr. Casey released his grip on Meakin's collar and gave him a shove.

"How about it, Jim?" he asked. "Have I told it straight?"

Mr. Meakin choked, grunted and nodded his head violently. He seemed in an unseemly hurry to be on his way, and Flatiron graciously dismissed him with an airy wave of his hand.

"Beat it." was his parting injunction. "Come around to-morrow and I'll give you another treatment. You ain't through with me-not yet!"

He watched Mr. Meakin rapidly disappear around the big top, then turned to Miss La Verne.

"Daisy," he said whimsically, "that guy can sprint, can't he?"

Suddenly he took a forward step that brought him quite close to the girl.

"How about it?" he asked softly. "Ain't it about time we quit kiddin' ourselves and started off—even up? Believe me, girly, I ain't gettin' the worst of it!"

Any one watching might have seen Miss La Verne look at young Mr. Casey in a way that was purely their own affair. Also, it might have been observed, a second later, that she was clasped tightly in his arms, and that he had his nose buried in her mass of blonde hair.

"All I got to say," he observed, after a moment of that, "is that any time this Riley Magee wants to ride me around the lot, he's welcome as spring. I can lick him the best day he ever lived—after this!"

Miss La Verne, with some difficulty, extricated herself from his arms and stepped back to smile at him.

"No question about it, Flat," she admitted calmly. "That gent that you just rode around the lot was Riley Magee!"