



By  
Thomas Thursday

**AN** ex-con has a hard time getting a job. Jimmy Gaylor found it out. So he went into his own business. Then he needed help...

**W**ARDEN John Crane's talk to the departing Jimmy Gaylor—No. 26974—was short, practical and fatherly.

"Jimmy," he said, "every man who serves his term and leaves this institution goes out with a smear on his character. I like to believe—and I know I *hope*—that their stay here has proved to them that crime does *not* pay, never *has* paid, and never *will* pay."

"Yes, sir," said Jimmy Gaylor, standing erect before him.

"Outside, Jimmy, you will find it difficult to get employment," went on the gray-templed warden. "You will have a hard task in making a place in the world. But, please, Jimmy—take the knocks and the cuffs like a man. Don't become bitter, like so many others, and return to crime. The weak ones do that but never the strong. Be strong, Jimmy, for your own sake, your mother's and mine."

"I was just wondering, Warden," said Jimmy, "if I should say frankly to possible employers that I have been in prison for five years?"

"By all means," replied Warden Crane. "And, Jimmy, I'll tell you why. Sooner or later your secret will be discovered. Unfortunately, the chief duty of some people is to mind everybody's business but their own. If you care to, you may refer employers to me."

"Thank you, Warden," said Jimmy. "You've been swell and I'll try not to disappoint you when I'm on the outside."

**N**OW Jimmy was again on the outside and still young, having just turned 25. And he had long planned to go back to Center City, his home town, and face the gossip and the stares of the citizens. Okay—he had it coming, but it was comforting to think that he had not

murdered any one. True, he had been dumb enough to accompany Ratsy Meegan on the job when Robert Sands was killed in his small gas station.

But Jimmy's part had been a minor one. He just sat there and kept the motor running, waiting for Ratsy to come out. It would just take a second said Ratsy and no one would be hurt. Such jobs were push-overs, according to him.

However, Robert Sands was not the kind of man who could be pushed by the Ratsy Meegans of the world. He tried to knock the gun out of Ratsy's hand and Ratsy let him have it right in the center of the temple. When Sands fell to the concrete floor Ratsy raced to the cash register and found two one-dollar bills and a fifty cent piece. Then he rushed to the car and, at the gun point, ordered Jimmy Gaylor to step on it.

Jimmy, badly frightened, had lost control of the car at the first turn, two blocks from the gas station, and crashed into a milk wagon. Both Ratsy and Jimmy were unhurt but badly stunned when Officer Hanan found them. So for the sum of \$2.50 an honest man was killed, a crack-pot gangster was executed in the death chair, and Jimmy Gaylor paid with five years of his life in the penitentiary. But within that five years Jimmy had ample time to realize that soft money is always hard.

The first person to recognize Jimmy when he reached Center City was Officer Hanan. The rotund cop had added considerable weight, probably at the expense of the fruit stands along his beat.

"Welcome home, Jimmy," greeted Hanan. "See that you keep your nose clean!"

"I will," grinned Jimmy, "even if I have to borrow your dirty handkerchief to do it."

FIVE years can do a lot to a town like Center City. For one thing, it can take on a greater population and it can remove many of the old crowd. Jimmy was glad to note so many new faces, faces that didn't know him for an ex-con. His father had died while he was in prison and his mother was now running a boarding house. Mrs. Mary Gaylor, now nearing sixty, was sure that her son was innocent of the whole thing, regardless of how people had talked. Mothers are like that. She told Jimmy when he reached home that he should just take it easy for a few weeks, rest and eat well. Mothers are also like that.

Jimmy, however, was neither a bum nor a loafer. He had worked from the age of 16, steadily, right up to the time of his arrest, and had been assistant shipping clerk for the McAdams Packing Company. Two days after reaching Center City, Jimmy decided to go around and see his old boss, Henry Petersen, the superintendent. He wanted a job, any old job, just for a start.

"Well, well, well," greeted Petersen. "If it isn't Jimmy Gaylor! Glad to see you, Jimmy!"

"Got a job for me some place, Mr. Petersen?" asked Jimmy. The heavy, blue-jowled face of Henry Petersen changed like a thermometer that had just been soaked in ice cubes.

"Well—er—not just now, Jimmy. Perhaps if you come around when business picks up. You know how it is, Jimmy."

Yes, Jimmy thought he knew how it was. He had anticipated just such a run-around. Petersen had no intention of giving him a job and Jimmy knew it. So Jimmy read the want ads in the Center City *Courier* and chased around town answering them. Most of the times the jobs were filled before he had reached the place but far too often the jobs he might

have gotten were lost when Jimmy offered Warden John Crane as a reference.

“Oh, I see,” remarked one oily-haired pompadoured personnel clerk. “That makes it rather complicated. I’m afraid that—ah—well, you understand, I’m sure. Sorry!”

“Sure,” said Jimmy. “I know how it is.”

**A**BOUT a week later Jimmy heard that the Center City Manufacturing Company was going to turn its big plant into making defense material. He was one of the first to get in line to make out an application. When he came to the reference line, he filled out —*John Crane, Warden State Penitentiary.*

He waited two weeks but was not called for an interview. He observed that others, who had applied after him, were now employed. A tinge of bitterness began to creep into his thoughts but he recalled the plea of Warden Crane and tried to forget about it.

“Look, Mom,” he said one night, “I tell them the truth and what do I get?”

“Now, now, son,” soothed Mom Gaylor, “don’t worry. We’re not hungry and you must be patient. Something will surely turn up. I know it, Jimmy; I *know* it!”

Now, in the old pre-prison days, the chief nick in Jimmy’s armor was a weakness for now and then playing the horses. In his spare time he used to hang around Joe Martin’s poolroom, with the bookie joint behind the rear partition, and play the ponies. It was here he had first met Ratsy Meegan and observed that Ratsy always had plenty of dough.

So one afternoon he dropped into Joe Martin’s place, his first since his release, and watched the blackboard. He had no intention of betting and the five bucks he

had in his pocket had been there for a long time.

Then his eye caught the name of a horse and the name startled him. It was *Black Stripes* in the fourth race, now coming up. How could he ever forget the black stripes he had worn for five years! Perhaps, maybe—well, he knew that hunches were usually the bunk, but a strong hunch overcame him.

He fingered the five-spot in his pocket tentatively and appraisingly. Then he walked over to Joe Martin and asked what sort of a horse *Black Stripes* was.

“Just a filler,” said Joe. “First time I heard of him was last year, at Hialeah. Had two or three starts and I guess they had to turn a searchlight on the track to show him the way home.”

“What odds can I get on him?” asked Jimmy.

Joe Martin laughed. “Why be a sap, Jimmy? You ain’t working and I guess jobs are scarce for guys like you. I don’t want to take your dough, Jimmy.”

“I know all about that, Joe; but I still want to know what odds I can get on *Black Stripes.*”

“Well, if you insist, I don’t mind laying 50-to-1 on that dog. But don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

“Okay,” said Jimmy. “Here’s five bucks.”

Fifteen minutes later Jimmy Gaylor left Joe Martin’s place with \$250 of Joe’s money. “Hey, listen,” said the amazed Joe, “did you have an inside on that sleeper?”

“Just an inside hunch,” grinned Jimmy, “that’s all. And just remember, Joe, that my last bet was on the house!”

As Jimmy walked toward home his spirits were as high as the clouds. One thought troubled him. How could he tell Mom? She hated racing and if he told her the truth it would hurt her. He never

wanted to hurt Mom again. Nor did he want to lie about it.

"Listen, Mom," he said, "I got \$250 and I wish you wouldn't ask me *how* I got it. *Please Mom!*"

The lined face of Mom Gaylor blanched. "Oh, Jimmy, boy. Jimmy—"

"I know what you are thinking, Mom, but I swear that I got the money honestly. And listen, Mom—it will give me a chance to do something for myself!"

FOR several weeks, now, Jimmy had passed and dreamed about the possibilities of a small, vacant store on Main Street. If nobody would give him a job, then he'd *make* one! He'd show Center City that, although he had made one dumb mistake five years ago, he wasn't any born crook or loafer.

Jimmy learned that the rent for forty dollars per month, two months in advance. "I got to get it," said the agent, "account of some other tenants not paying."

Next he had to get some credit with a soda fountain company and get other fixtures. He was glad to find that this was not difficult and also that he could get cigars and candy with small down deposit. When he was through with the rent and the dealers he had about thirty-five dollars left as working capital.

Then he got a big idea, a scheme to attract attention. His store was going to be distinctive, it was going to stand out like palm trees in Alaska! So he had the whole place painted white and, when that was completed, he had the whole store decorated with horizontal black stripes, about four inches apart. More, he had decided to name the store *The Black Stripes*.

"I guess that will give them something to talk about!" mused Jimmy when the job was done. "I'm an ex-con, trying to go straight. So what!"

Even as the startling name of the store was being painted on the front window Jimmy Gaylor went around to see Ted Barker, city-editor of the *Courier*. He told Barker his whole story, how he had tried and tried to get a job and had failed. How he had decided to open a store in an effort to earn an honest living and, finally, the name of the store.

"Swell!" said City Editor Barker. "Just the sort of a story that will chase the war off the front pages for a few moments. I'll send a photographer around and take some pictures. Swell, Jimmy—and lots of luck!"

Two days later *The Black Stripes* store opened for business and the *Courier* had a fine story about Jimmy, along with three photos. Business boomed from the start and within a week Jimmy knew that he would die from lack of sleep and overwork. He needed an assistant and it was then that another novel and radical idea entered his head. He told his plan to Ted Barker.

"Go to it," advised the city editor. "Why not? It's all legal!"

The next day the *Courier* printed the following classified advertisement: *WANTED—Young man for soda and a sundry store. Experience is not necessary but honesty is. Only ex-convicts need apply. Box 56, Courier.*

He received but two replies and none from Center City. If there were any ex-cons in his home-town they either kept their records a secret or did not care to be bothered with employment. The first reply came from Stanleyville, 30 miles east, and the other from Bailey's Junction, 20 miles south. The one from Stanleyville, signed Mike Petrolli, left Jimmy rather cold. It said that Petrolli had been framed three times and that he was innocent each time. It concluded, "All cops are bums. If I ever kill a guy I hope it is a cop!"

Jimmy promptly figured that the letter

was a phony. He knew from his own experience in the Pen that too many guys, who were guilty, whined that they had been framed.

The second letter was from one Jack Harrison. It said, in part, "I will be only too glad to work on trial for a few days. All I want is a chance."

**J**IMMY wired Jack Harrison to come on at once. And when Jimmy reached the store the next morning at 7 o'clock a slim, blond lad, with blue eyes, had been waiting there for him since 5 a.m.

"I didn't know they had such early trains," said Jimmy.

"I got a ride on a truck," said Jack. "I couldn't afford to ride on a train any way."

Jimmy took a good look at the new lad and wondered how anyone so innocent looking could ever have been a jailbird. His gray suit was neat but rather shabby and his shoes were worn thin. Jimmy opened the store and told Jack to go in.

"Now, listen," said Jimmy. "I'm not going to ask you what your rap was or anything personal, see? All I want is to give some ex-con a chance to go on the level. If I catch you doing any monkey business I'll break your neck in six places!"

"Please try me," said Jack Harrison. "Just give me a chance!"

"Okay," said Jimmy. "You might start sweeping up. The broom is in the back."

Before the week was over Jimmy discovered he had a swell assistant in Jack Harrison. The lad, who was about Jimmy's age, never had asked what his salary or hours would be. Or even when he would get a day off. He seemed happy to be at work and soon learned to mix sodas better than Jimmy.

When Jack had been with Jimmy about three weeks, Jimmy began to make plans for his future. He knew now, positively,

that Jack was honest. He had put him to the test by leaving stray bills in places that only Jack could find. Not once had he touched them and Jimmy felt like a heel for testing him.

"Listen, Jack," said Jimmy, as they closed one night. "I've been thinking that you and me have been hitting it off pretty well."

"Thanks, Jimmy. You've been great to me and I like to work for you."

"Well," went on Jimmy, "you've been working harder in this joint than I have, so I'll tell you what I am going to do. There's an empty store around on Cherry Street that should make a good spot for another shop. We could call it *The Black Stripes No.2*. I was thinking of opening that place and putting you in charge. Just to make it interesting for you, you can be a partner."

"But, Jimmy," said Jack, "I haven't been here long enough to save enough money to be a partner!"

"Who *asked* you for any money!" snapped Jimmy. "I figure a guy will take more interest in a joint if he is part of the business; that's why I am taking you in—free. Besides, I got my start in this store with a break and I am going to pass it along to you."

Jack Harrison remained silent. He was choking up and simply couldn't say a word. Jimmy found that tears were beginning to well up in his eyes.

"For cripe's sakes!" said Jimmy. "What's biting you?"

"Gosh, Jimmy—I—I don't know what to say! You see, Jimmy—"

"Aw, forget it, forget it!" Jimmy couldn't stand any show of emotion. "I figure that I'm giving myself a break by taking you into partnership. I want to show this cock-eyed town what a couple of ex-cons can really do when they get the chance!"

"That's what I want to talk to you

about, Jimmy,” said Jack. “You see—well, you see—”

“Hey. What ails you?” barked Jimmy. “See—*what?*”

“Gosh, Jimmy, I don’t know how to say it. I mean, I lied to you when I told you that I was an ex-convict. I never even been arrested for stealing apples when I was a kid! But honest, Jimmy—I needed a job, bad. And I couldn’t get one in Bailey’s Junction. And I wanted to get married, Jimmy—I have one swell girl, back home—”

For a long moment Jimmy just stared at Jack Harrison. The news had knocked him rather flat. Jack began to remove his apron.

“Go ahead and fire me, Jimmy—I won’t blame you. I’ll still think you are a great guy, Jimmy. And I can’t tell you how sorry I am that I lied to you.”

Jimmy doubled his right fist and tapped Jack lightly on the chin. “Okay,” he said; “forget it. You’ve heard the old saying that a crook can’t get an honest job unless he hides his record? You just turned the saying around, that’s all!”