

*This story was an entry to a flash-fiction competition where the limit was 500 words.*

“What do you think of that, Charlie?” I asked.

“Load of bloody rubbish,” he said, taking a swig of beer.

We had just seen a report on the news which talked about the reform of prisoners and how the current system was failing to achieve it.

“You can’t reform villains,” Charlie went on, “they’re just villains, and that’s the way they stay.”

Charlie is a retired policeman, and fairly outspoken in his views on crime and politics.

“All we do is put them away for a while,” he said. “You listen to any judge sentencing them. They just say ‘society deserves a rest from your activities’. So we just put them away for a few years, and we get a bit of peace, and then they come out and take up where they left off.”

“Well, aren’t there ways of treating them psychologically?” I asked.

“Drivel! Everyone thinks there is, until you ask them what these methods are, and then they just start blathering or saying there must be some. Believe me, there aren’t. What I would do is put them away for life after their third arrest, and make them work for their keep, or at least sterilize them so they can’t pass on their behaviour to their children. My very first arrest was a whole criminal family: father, mother, teenage son and daughter. All of them spent their whole lives in and out of prison, or reform school, as we called them then. ‘Reform’ be blowed! All it did was put a group of young criminals together so they could teach each other how to commit further crimes.

“Anyway, by some freak chance this whole family were all out of prison at the same time, and they decided to celebrate by raiding the local jeweller. In those days – if you remember – jewellers used to have thick glass windows, and a grill which was too small to put your hand through. So the son tells them about a way of breaking the glass which he learned in reform school. Or maybe from the movies. You cover a sheet of brown paper with honey, and spread it over the glass. Then you throw a brick through the middle, and bingo! You have a smashed window without a sound.

“So they tried it out using marmalade as they didn’t have honey, and it worked like a dream. They reached in using a fishing rod, and took out all the jewellery they could get to, and went home.

“Well, as you can imagine, in all their years of petty theft and burglary, they’d never netted a haul like that. Twenty, maybe thirty thousand pounds. They spread it out on the kitchen table and were admiring it, when there was a ring on the bell, and we came in and nicked the lot of them.

“You see the brown paper they had used had come from a parcel someone had sent them, and had their name and address on it.”