

A Scene of Crime

It's chilly in here and there's a sickly-sweet smell together with a whiff of singed fabric. The gas lamp to the right of the mantelpiece is lit but turned low, giving everything a yellowish tinge. Heavy curtains cover the bay window so no one outside can tell if there are any lights on.

This tiny room is crammed with furniture and bric-a-brac. An old-fashioned dark wooden dresser dominates, the top and open shelves overflowing with ornaments and papers. In one corner there's a two-seat open-backed sofa with a violin case balanced on one arm. Above the mantelpiece hangs a large mirror, partly obscured by half a dozen framed photographs and a glass urn. In the window bay a table has a plant on it, then across the window a chaise longue with two cushions and, in front, another table with yet another plant. An upright piano, a music stand and two formal, upholstered dining chairs are in here as well. Almost every available inch of the walls is covered with framed pictures and ornamental plates, and photographs occupy every surface. The effect is to make the room seem even smaller than it is.

There's someone in here too, lying on her right side diagonally across the hearthrug, her feet close to the fender in front of the unlit gas fire, her right arm beneath her body, her left draped over her chest with the hand almost touching the floor. Around her head and soaking into the rug is a halo of congealing blood, brain tissue and bone. Just above and in front of her left ear her head has been smashed open and with a little more light it would be possible to see clearly the part

of her brain that has not been dashed out. The violence of the attack has splattered blood all over the walls in the back right corner, yet not one of the many objects that fill the room has been disturbed.

Time is suspended. For a short while yet no one, except whoever did this to her, knows of her fate, not even the neighbours on the other side of the thin party wall that divides these terrace houses. The silent room waits for the next act, the discovery, the throwing of light on an appalling deed. When that happens it will change everything, not only for those finding the dead woman but also for all affected by the discovery who will struggle to keep their heads above the flood of consequences.

The wait is nearly over. Someone outside the house is trying to unlock the front door. Unsuccessfully, it seems, since whoever's there knocks to attract attention. A few minutes pass. Someone tries the back door, followed by more knocking. After a short silence the same thing again at the front door.

A little while later the door into the room is pushed open. There's a sharp intake of breath, then the gas is turned up full and what has been done is revealed.

The shadow of a tall, thin man, grotesquely elongated by the lamp, is thrown against the walls. The man and the shadow stoop to take the left wrist of the woman. There's no pulse. It's about a quarter to nine in the evening of Tuesday, January 20th 1931. The place is 29 Swindon Street, Anfield, Liverpool. The man's name is Walter Henry Bruce. The dead woman is his wife, Janet.

I hope you found this first dip into Stalemate made you want to read the whole book. If it did, and you'd like to pass that on to others, please use the link here. 