



Death from a Top Hat, New York, Putnam, 1938

DEATH FROM A TOP HAT

Clayton Rawson

The Isaac Mendoza Book Company was the oldest bookstore in America when I walked through its ancient door in the late 1960s. It was on Ann Street at the northern tip of the Financial District and occupied three floors of a rickety wooden building. The owner, Walter Caron, had been a ballet dancer, a head waiter, and the handsome model for the dust jacket of Mika Waltari's massive best-seller *The Egyptian*. He owned the original painting and kept it in the back of the bookstore's second floor.

He was also a collector whose collection had outgrown his apartment, so he rented a loft on Chambers Street in TriBeCa to serve as his library. "You start collecting, and the next thing you know you have so many books you don't know what to do," he said. The rent on the enormous loft was

\$65 a month. In its gentrified neighborhood, today it would be worth millions. Coincidentally, his former loft is just around the corner from the current location of the Mysterious Bookshop.

He was reading a mystery in his cluttered shop when I met him. Another bookseller had recommended that I meet Walter and browse the shelves on the third floor if he would let me. Business had been pretty bad for several years, so the shelves were filled with old books that had been priced years earlier and there were bargains galore. The third floor was not generally open to the public because his better books were up there. Mostly mysteries, it turned out, many of which he regarded as part of his personal collection.

A few years after we met and had become friendly, Walter told me he had to close the store. This was partly because the rent had gone up, partly because so few customers dropped in, and partly because he was seventy. He was selling most of his stock but he wanted to keep the mysteries for his own collection. He asked if I and Norm Nolan, my closest book-collecting friend in those days, would help him move the books. Walter offered to pay us but we came up with a counter-proposal: let us take

away a few books for our own collections as recompense.

He readily agreed and on a Saturday morning we met him at the shop. He had rented a van and we began packing books and carrying the cartons down two long flights of stairs to the van. When it was full, we drove up to Chambers Street and carried the cartons up an even longer flight of stairs to the loft. He showed us the empty shelves reserved for the twelve or fifteen hundred books we had just moved. While he returned the rental van, we unpacked the books and placed them on the shelves, each of us setting aside a few books for what we hoped would be our reward for the labors of what had been an exhausting day.

The stacks got higher than they should have, and we figured we'd negotiate which books would make a fair bargain. Walter was torn between wanting to be generous to us and not letting too many of his prized volumes go out the door. We reached an accommodation that pleased all three of us.

My haul was six books. I don't recall them all but the day came fully back in my memory every time I saw the lovely copy of Clayton Rawson's *Death from a Top* that I took away. Walter had all

four Rawson first editions in beautiful dust jackets, inscribed and signed by Rawson, and he let all four go—two for Norm, two for me.

In addition to being an author of mystery fiction and an editor (at *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* for many years, among other publications), Clayton Rawson was also an accomplished magician. I met him in 1970 at the first Edgar Allan Poe Awards banquet that I attended when my friend Chris Steinbrunner introduced us. He invited the two of us upstairs to his hotel room before the banquet began and performed a half-hour of amazing close-up magic tricks, just for the fun of it.

Anyone would have enjoyed this private performance but I particularly love magic shows, still go to them whenever I can, and performed in one at the age of eight in a school talent show. The best trick (think low bar) was a promise to the audience that I would show them something that nobody in the world had ever seen before and, after they saw it, nobody ever would again. I then removed a peanut from its shell, held it up for all to see, and ate it.

Rawson's four novels all featured the Great Merlini, a magician and magic-store owner who

was called in by the New York Police Department when crimes were so baffling that they appeared to be impossible. *Death from a Top Hat* was the first of his remarkable locked room mysteries.

Landing a magnificent copy of a book on the Haycraft-Queen Definitive Library of Detective-Crime-Mystery Fiction for no more than sweat and a sore back is a deal I'd still make anytime.