
The Redmond Confession

by Gary Tillery, SFSPE

Our family has kept this secret for far too long.

On the 3rd of October 1849, Edgar Allan Poe was found wandering the streets of Baltimore, delirious, dressed in someone else's clothing. He died four days later still mentally deranged. His death proved to be one of the greatest mysteries he left us, since the cause of his delirium was never determined.

Was it alcohol? Cholera? Rabies? No one knows.

No one outside the Redmond family.

I will explain, but I ask you to keep in mind that Poe was never the same after the passing of his wife, Virginia, in 1847. She was his lamp in a dark and troubled life, the "wife whom I loved as no man ever loved before." From the first signs of tuberculosis in early 1842, he watched, with growing despair, her long, cruel slide toward the grave—five years of coughing fits, bloodied handkerchiefs, ebbing strength. When she died at the young age of 24, his soul was crushed.

One other thing you need to know—and this is the key to this whole affair—as a literary critic, Poe dipped his pen in acid. He could be vicious. Longfellow, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Cooper are only the first victims to come to mind from a long list. For the way he attacked other writers in print, literary figures of his time called him "Tomahawk Man."

Now I can come to the point.

In the year before Poe's death, Clark Redmond was a brilliant young man with a gift for poetry. He published a number of short poems, and he was growing in renown in Baltimore. But early in 1848, Poe came across a few of his poems in a magazine, and the review he wrote was scathing.

It may be that he had been drinking and his judgment was clouded. It may simply be a case of his own frustrations in life boiling over. He likely forgot about the review in a day or two and moved on to other things. But for Clark, his whole future was stolen. Once a rising star is belittled by a critic of Poe's stature, editors and readers no longer view his work in a balanced way.

Clark was not the kind of man to accept this blow passively. The wound festered. He eventually came up with a way to get even—one in keeping with Poe's taste for the macabre. We can debate whether or not any critic—even Poe—deserved such retribution, but Clark's plan was so loathsome that the Redmond family has always, until now, felt that to make it public would tar us with shame.

Clark learned that Poe was in Baltimore, passing through on his way from Richmond to New York. Under the false name of Calvin Reynolds, Clark sent Poe a sealed letter by special messenger. He told Poe that he had long admired his work and wanted to offer him the opportunity of a private viewing of some amazing artifacts.

He said that he had recently returned from Paris. There he met Armand, the son of a gendarme who had lived through the Reign of Terror, and who was among the revolutionaries who escorted the carts that carried the bodies of the executed king and queen to be buried in the Madeleine Cemetery. This gendarme felt special hatred for Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette because his father had committed some minor theft of food and was thrown into prison and died there. So, while his comrades prepared to leave after the two burials—the king's in January of 1793, the queen's in October—the gendarme slipped out of sight. After they started back toward the city, he returned to dig up the bloody heads. He stuffed

them into burlap sacks and brought them to his home.

He locked them away in his cellar for decades. The flesh grew putrid and rotted, but the stench went unnoticed because his cottage was near a slaughterhouse. In time, the last bits of flesh and muscle and hair flaked away, and the skulls were fully exposed.

The gendarme had died almost a decade earlier, but his fifty-year-old son knew where they were hidden because he had been shown the grisly prizes on more than one occasion. As Calvin Reynolds, Clark said that he had befriended Armand when he helped to fend off a robbery attempt on the Rue Saint-Lazare. When Armand learned that Clark was a collector of relics, he shared the dark secret with him. He said he worried that the authorities might one day find out and send him to prison, so he had in mind to rebury the skulls in the country. Clark offered to purchase them. Yes, they were ghoulish artifacts, but he felt compelled to own them because of their historical importance. Now, he wondered if Poe, with his interests in history, death, and arcane objects, might want to view them. Just as he expected, Poe leaped at the chance.

But Clark imposed conditions. Worried that the secret might get out, he insisted that Poe come alone, at midnight, and that he travel in a carriage with curtains drawn so that he would not see the way. He was also to bring the written invitation with him so Clark could destroy it.

At midnight, as the calendar passed from October 2nd to October 3rd, Poe climbed into the brougham that arrived to fetch him. Their meeting, as it was recounted by Clark and passed down in our family, went like this:

Clark (as Calvin) had waited in the brougham while the driver went to find Poe in the inn where he was staying. When Poe climbed inside, he was unshaven and haggard in appearance, but he did not forget his Southern manners. “How

gracious of you to invite me, Mr. Reynolds,” he said, extending his hand. “Thank you for this opportunity.”

Clark shook it. “I felt sure you would be interested.”

“How could I resist?”

“The invitation, if you please?” Poe handed it to him, and Clark slipped it into the pocket of his coat, to be cast into the fireplace later.

While they rode through the deserted streets, the gas lamps illuminated the curtains. From time to time, their faces arose from the inky darkness like faint apparitions. Clark recounted the trip to Paris, embellishing memories of a real visit in his youth with invented ones. Soon he came around to the subject of the skulls. “I offered Armand three hundred francs for them—more or less a year’s wages. He never even tried to bargain. He seemed relieved to be free of them.”

“They were more meaningful for his father,” Poe observed.

“Precisely,” Clark said. “The main thing that strikes me about these skulls—and the point I want to make in showing them to you—is death as the Great Leveler. They are so ordinary. Examine them as closely as you want; there is not a clue that either of them had royal blood, or that they ruled one of the most powerful nations on Earth. They could just as well have been a footman and a maid.”

Poe said, “We are all the same beneath our skins.”

Clark started to question Poe about his stories, but they soon arrived at Clark’s house. When the carriage stopped, he asked if Poe would mind holding his hat in front of his face until they were inside the front door.

“As you wish,” Poe said.

Clark guided him by the elbow to the doorway. "I'm sorry to have to ask such things, but—"

"I understand," Poe said.

The interior of the house did not suggest a man of means. Clark worried that Poe might become suspicious, so he had left only one coal-oil lamp burning at the far side of the main room. He tossed the letter into the fireplace while he ushered Poe into the most impressive room, the library. There he had removed certain items and prominently displayed others to create the impression of a well-off gentleman. He turned up the flame on the nearest lamp. A second lamp rested on a round table, illuminating a leather case placed next to it.

While Poe was diverted, glancing around the room to spy the subject of his visit, Clark hastened to pour two drinks. "Brandy?" he asked, offering one to Poe.

Poe hesitated, "No, th—"

Clark interjected, "To hold, then. It's already poured."

Poe accepted the glass out of courtesy, and Clark lifted his and said, "To your health."

Poe acknowledged the toast by touching the glass to his lips and sipping, and step two of the carefully thought-out plan was accomplished.

"Let's waste no time," Clark said, anxious to proceed before Poe had the chance to become suspicious. He moved to the round table. He turned the leather case toward them and unfastened the latch, more deliberately than was necessary.

Poe followed him. Focused on the case, he took another sip of the brandy.

The only thing visible at first was red velvet. Clark parted the material and two skulls

appeared, glowing like pale ghosts in the lamplight against the lush red background.

Poe was intensely silent, eyes fixed on the morbid artifacts. He took another sip of brandy. Though only a step away, he moved even nearer to the skulls, pressing against the table. He reached. "May I?"

"Of course," Clark said.

Poe touched the top of Louis XVI's head, his fingertips feeling the porous texture. From there, he continued to probe the topography of the relic, lost in thought.

His other hand still held the glass of brandy. He downed it in one swallow in order to set the glass aside. Then he shifted his attention to the more petite skull of the two.

According to tradition, while approaching her executioner, Marie Antoinette had accidentally stepped on his shoe: "*Pardonnez-moi, monsieur. Je ne l'ai pas fait exprès*" ("Pardon me, sir. I did not do it on purpose"). Moments later, he responded to her courtly courtesy by letting slip the blade that severed her skull—*this* skull, the one Poe now lightly stroked—from her lovely body.

Clark watched Poe lose himself in profound reflection, as though he were alone in a cathedral.

Proceed to the next step? No, be patient. Let him inhabit the illusion first, grow comfortable within it.

At last he said to Poe, "How despicable these people were—living at the very pinnacle of society, at ease, yet completely insensitive to the mass of humanity that labored beneath them." While speaking, he had unobtrusively picked up the bottle. Now he brought it to the lip of Poe's glass: "A toast to reminding tyrants that they are humans, after all!"

Pulled out of his reverie, Poe reached toward the glass as though to place his fingers across the top. But then he seemed to realize that doing so made him appear to side with tyrants. Clark poured, and Poe joined him in another swallow.

Clark now pretended to grow furious. “Here the scales are balanced, my friend. Right here! Except that the two of them never knew what it was to suffer. Their end came in the time it took a blade to flash. They had no idea how the rest of us suffer.” He put emphasis on the final words, knowing that they would resonate with Poe— orphaned at two, a genius not appreciated, under constant financial strain, his young wife stolen by a nightmarish disease.

Poe leaned his head back and tossed down the remaining brandy.

Clark thought, *Soon now.*

“Think of them in Versailles,” he went on, “dressed in their finery, savoring the pleasures of life, while beneath them millions suffered. I understand how the gendarme felt. Yes, I felt it, too. Maybe that explains my compulsion to buy their skulls from Armand. Do you feel it as well?”

A fire arose in Poe’s eyes—enmity for the powers of the world that kept him frustrated.

“Do you?” Clark asked again.

Poe nodded, “Yes.”

Now. “They deserved contempt, but no one ever dared to show it. But now...” Clark picked up the skull of Louis XVI and held it near his face. “Now His Imperial Majesty is nothing more than a chunk of dried bone. With a little effort, I could snap the king into pieces, and there is nothing he can do. But even better than that, I can show my contempt—!”

With that, he spat in the face of the one-time king. The spittle stuck to the bone on one brow ridge. Clark glanced at Poe, a smirk on his lips.

Poe seemed off-balance from the unexpected act.

Still smirking, Clark said, “It’s an opportunity that will never come again, Mr. Poe.” He glanced down at the skull of Marie Antoinette.

Poe followed his glance. He hesitated for a moment, then looked at the relic as if it personified all that had made his life a tale of misery.

Clark sneered, “‘Let them eat cake!’ she said.”

Poe picked up the skull and held it a few inches from his lips. He spat. Then his lips formed a twisted smile and he glanced toward Clark. But instead of approval, he saw something else in Clark’s eyes.

A strange glimmer.

“I have something to confess,” Clark said.

Once more off-balance, Poe asked, “What do you mean?”

The smirk returned. “These are not the skulls of Louis the Sixteenth and Marie Antoinette.” Poe looked adrift, and Clark relished his confusion. “They are not French at all. They come from a cemetery in New York.”

As Poe stared, his brow furrowed.

“This, my friend,” said Clark, “is retribution on behalf of someone you have wronged. You have ruined his life. Now you stand exposed as an undiscerning fool. When you—”

Poe interrupted, “*Which* cemetery in New York?”

Clark could not suppress a smile. Unintentionally, he had triggered the next step of the plan, simplifying matters. “Fordham.”

Now horror crept into Poe’s eyes. “*Fordham Cemetery?*”

“Yes, a vault belonging to the Valentine family.”

Poe’s features contorted. Completely destitute when Virginia died, he had accepted an offer by his landlord, John Valentine, to inter her in the family vault.

The trap had sprung. Clark had taken the precaution of leaning a heavy cane against the wall behind him. He prepared to grab it to defend himself. He said, with a sardonic smile, “Won’t this make a nice little tale of the macabre?”

Poe stood paralyzed. His horrified gaze dropped to the skull in his hand. He could neither continue to hold it nor fling it away. He had desecrated the remains of the one pure thing in his life.

Clark savored the sight—the master of horror trapped in a moment of horror. The deep wound to his own psyche was now avenged. He began to prepare in his mind the final step, the *coup de grâce*.

Surely the man who had given the world *The Great Balloon Hoax* and *The Case of M. Valdemar*, and who enjoyed looking down on those who were taken in by his tales, could accept it when someone did the same to him.

The whole evening was a sham. These were not the skulls of royals—and the female of the two was most definitely not Virginia, stolen from a crypt in New York by a grave robber. They were specimens from a Baltimore medical school, borrowed through the graces of a friendly professor.

So, the fictitious Reynolds prepared to reveal: “Mr. Poe, do you recall writing that scathing review of Clark Redmond’s poems last year?”

But he failed to see, in the torment in Poe’s eyes, that the revelation was coming too late.

Poe gave a soul-rending cry and collapsed to the floor.

Clark called for help. The man who was his valet and carriage driver rushed into the room. No matter how they attempted to bring Poe to his senses again—water in his face, brandy to his lips, smelling salts—they could not draw a reasoned response. Locked in mental agony, he began to thrash on the floor, and in one convulsion he rolled onto the female skull. He gave a cry—then a second, much louder cry, when he realized what the hard object had been.

He leaped to his feet to rip off the jacket that had touched the skull and stumbled into the table that held the leather case. The lamp on the table came crashing down, spilling oil onto a rug.

Now he began to rip off his shirt. Before they could stop his crazed behavior, Poe stood shoeless in his underwear.

Clark struggled with him while simultaneously trying to contain the flame on the rug. Clark’s man wrestled him from behind. Seizing the leather case, he slammed it sidewise against Poe’s head.

While Poe lay unconscious, they tried to dress him but discovered that his clothing had been scorched by the flame. Clark had his man bring some of his old clothing, and they eventually managed to dress Poe in ill-fitting pants, a faded black coat, and scuffed boots.

They carried him out to the brougham. Though he mumbled incessantly, he never regained his mind. They rode to East Lombard Street, where they left Poe sitting against the side wall of a tavern named Gunner’s Hall. **Ω**