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Memento Mori

Written by
Paul Montgomery

Illustration by Lance Wolf



WORMWOOD

and the **Five Fingers of Glory**

a prose/audio anthology from Habit Forming Films.

www.wormwoodshow.com



{Fig. 1} ex., "Hand of Glory"

Wormwood: A Serialized Mystery is an audio podcast production of Habit Forming Films, LLC.

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The Complete Wormwood Seasons 1 & 2 are currently available via iTunes and the Wormwood website, www.wormwoodshow.com.

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Wormwood and the Five Fingers of Glory

An Audio & Prose Anthology for

Wormwood: A Serialized Mystery

The Hand of Glory remains one of the strange artifacts at the dark heart of the many mysteries of Wormwood. An occult object of great curiosity, The Hand has crept into the very center of the chaotic maelstrom of murder and magic in Wormwood, California. The Hand's true origin has never been revealed. Until now.

"The Five Fingers of Glory" is a new anthology kicking off third season of the critically acclaimed and award-winning audio drama podcast, *Wormwood: A Serialized Mystery*.

The anthology series charts the path of the fabled Hand of Glory through history, from its creation in 700 BC to its arrival in present-day Wormwood. Inspired by the works of writers such as Robert E. Howard, Bram Stoker, Dashiell Hammett and Richard Matheson, three Wormwood writers have taken up the task of revealing the storied history of the Hand of Glory from the dusty streets of ancient Assyria to a haunted Sicilian Monastery to the shadowy backstreets of Chinatown and beyond.



...I felt as if I were the spectacle to this motley assembly. These were no mere skeletons, but browned and breathless caricatures.

Memento Mori

by

Paul Montgomery

(with acknowledgment to the works of Bram Stoker & Edgar Allan Poe)

12 May, 1881

Dearest Celeste,

I find myself, finally, in the Sicily of your memories. Fresh oranges rushed to my ankles in the harbor surf, tiny fallen suns, just as you said they might. Raphael, my guide and our cousin of some removal, gathered them up in his shirttails. Pulling a razor from his satchel, he offered me one of the splendid spheres. I declined, suggesting that any oranges I might enjoy — indeed, any fruits at all — should come from our father's orchard. He sheared vibrant flesh, leaving it to float in the crystalline waters, making short work of what remained. For the first time in our long journey, I was relieved you were not with me, big sister, so obscene was our cousin's mastication!

We took leave of our hosts, bidding farewell to the miserable barge. We walked barefoot through the shanty town and its jolly marketplace where we were greeted only with smiles. Dark-faced men hauled fish and casks of spring wines.

Hindus in their kerchiefs held fine fabrics to my cheek. The earth was warm on the soles of my feet (Everyone walks barefoot here). Even what bags I did carry – for we had many porters – felt all the lighter in such a walking dream.

How could it be possible, this negligence of my faculties? I have tread upon these sands, these pebbles, these streets before, but I retain not a glimmer of this wondrous island or the plantation which bears our crest. All of this place, this Sicily, is new, is pristine to my senses. They say I learned to walk here, was just beginning to wobble about when Mother ushered us to that ship and unto our new life in England. I savor this place now as if reclaiming those years since. Such times we could have had under this roiling sun, awash in these waves. Though I am a guest in this place, I truly feel as a sailor returned from weary sojourns to his waiting home. Today I am a modern Ulysses, if frail and bedraggled. If you'll permit, I offer Raphael as my shield-bearing steward, only just released from Circe's hex. He may grunt and cavort like swine, but his is a fine old soul, simple in his pleasures and generous in his dealings. And always a song on his lips!

The rest of our people, Raphael's many brothers and sisters, are much the same. They love this land and this life. I see our father's face in ancient Tommaso, who now resides at the head of the table here in Palermo. He has provided for me a soft bed and all the comforts of nobility for however long I choose to reside in his company.

My best to Mother and the scores of kin I left at the docks those many weeks ago. Gather them up as if they were floating oranges and squeeze them all for me. I think of you as I rest my weary form upon this porch and look out upon the swaying orchard. I partake of my first orange and know now why Raphael could

not bear to wait for land before tasting the sun.

Yours smiling,

Ambrose



25 May, 1881

Dearest Celeste,

I was overjoyed this morning to receive your response, however brief. I assure you that it is no trouble to continue writing you with reports of my adventures abroad. Indeed, it is my pleasure to do so. I am saddened, of course, that Mother does not wish to look upon my correspondence, but with the unpleasantness of the Christmas holiday still lingering, I understand her reluctance. Do keep these letters, for the time will come when she again seeks word of my frivolous escapades. She need only beckon for my return and I shall commandeer the swiftest ship in the harbor and make haste to her side.

But perhaps that is a distant day.

As has been my custom on this journey, I spent my early days in Sicily seeking out a proper walking stick. I am a fickle pioneer and it took near on a week of auditioning. When I was satisfied that I had found the sturdiest crook in the Mediterranean, I bid Raphael plan a walkabout through the hills. The grand

schemer hurried off to make arrangements — and perhaps to escape the game of horseshoes he was quickly losing to old Tommaso.

The next day, Raphael roused me from my sleep in the early morning to hike a ways inland for a picnic lunch. After I'd dressed I was alarmed to find a veritable gypsy caravan awaiting me at the gate. What Raphael deems a picnic, we might call a wedding feast. Taking up my new walking stick, I joined the country march. I had but nibbled at the crust of Sicily before this day and I was ready to have my meal of it.

I was introduced to a local woman called Teresa. Like Raphael, this girl was quick to laugh, of constant good cheer, and content to while away the day in the grass, absorbing the noonday sun. The women here are pleasantly round, tending to their farms and partaking of the earth's bounty little by little throughout the workday. I asked Raphael if he intended to marry the girl, but he slapped my back and whispered that he had brought her there for me. I admit now that I may have reacted hotly, stomping off from the group. Of course I meant no offense to Teresa, but I fear that was how it was perceived. I am at a disadvantage in that I was unable to explain, in her own language, that I am still a young man and have no intention of making a home. I wonder whether Mother had anything to do with this, if she gave any instruction to our cousins that I should be tended to in such a manner.

Such are the concerns of a dedicated bachelor.

But I must recount a new discovery.

I followed the laughter of children to a clearing. Above this clearing rose a grassy hill. The boys had mounted the shrugged earth and were playing in a small graveyard. Another cathedral in an island prickly with steeples. This was

not Raphael's church, but when I described it to him later, his expression became somber. I took his big hand in mine and begged him "What is this place, Raphael?"

"It is where the dead wait," he answered.

"Yes, the graveyard," said I. It seemed out of character that Raphael would be fearful of a cemetery. But then his grin returned and he said:

"Not the graveyard. Under."

Under the graves? What could he have meant? I released his hand for a moment, but quickly reached for it again. Without thinking, I asked that he take me to this place. He considered this for a moment, nodded, and left me to a restless night.

I will report to you soon of the further unraveling of this queer island.

Yours,

Ambrose



1 June, 1881

Dearest Celeste,

Such things I have seen!

As promised, Raphael arranged that we meet a custodian of the cathedral on the hill. We left as the sun was sinking into the sea. Together we made our way up the slopes, humming Raphael's nameless song.

The cleric was an old man, not much taller than the headstones of the graveyard. He spoke with Raphael in hushed tones, never meeting his gaze. When I bowed in greeting he turned away, throwing open the cathedral doors.

High above, Christ on his gnarled crucifix gazed into the shadowy rafters toward Paradise. Or was He looking away from us?

We were led down a flight of stairs, seemingly hewn of the chalk white earth. The air was stale there and cold. As we descended deeper into the darkness I envisioned the head of the world turned downward, revealing the canal of its cavernous ear. We were lurking into the very skull of Creation, a place of memories, of secrets. I soon realized that we were indeed journeying to a distance beneath even the deepest of graves. Ahead of me, Raphael stumbled for just a moment, but it was enough to expel all the breath from my lungs. I reached out for his shoulder. He laughed at my nervousness and began to hum again his soothing pastoral melody. I composed myself, watching always the curve of the stairs before me. Raphael's song, stirring from so deep in his belly reverberated off the stone walls, never faltering. Then we were upon it.

I tell you, sister, it was at once grand and morose, a vast assembly of figures against the walls. There in this hall, scores of men stood still as trees on a windless night. I became ever conscious of the air in this chamber. It seemed only to move between my lips and those of my two hosts. We were all who had need of it, for these men, these countless occupants of the dark were long dead. At first all I knew was the vastness of the collection. There is no fixed account of their number, but surely it makes for a village. I became aware of their faces, taut in final agonies, contorted also, I am told, from the leathering of their flesh. The cleric raised his torch and I nearly collapsed, for above the line of corpses floated a second and third row of bodies. Some were bracketed tightly to the stone and others slumped in alcoves.

I beheld a gallery of the dead. They stood crooked yet attentive, a silent audience. Yes, I felt as if I were the spectacle to this motley assembly. These were no mere skeletons, but browned and breathless caricatures. Those faces! With no modesty to conceal their teeth, they grinned like wilting sycophants. Raphael and the cleric turned to me and I discovered that, in spite of myself I had been laughing for some time. It may seem queer to reflect on it now, but in their strained expressions I found a weird form of comedy. I was reminded of Mr. Caulderly's shoppe and the marionettes that hung there in the windows. Do you recall the old wooden bishop and his tiny rosary? He resides here at full height amongst his shriveled brethren.

Through Raphael I asked the old man a single question. "Why?"

He gave no answer.

I looked upon a cresh laden with straw. In it reclined a doll of such perfection. A young boy with shimmering golden locks. Why should a doll be left in such a

dismal place? Raphael crossed himself. I lost my breath. What I beheld was not a doll, but the body of a once resilient boy of about five years, preserved, perhaps for the remainder of eternity in a state of beatific grace. I began to weep, for I was convinced then of the presence of angels.

After some time traversing the catacombs, the cleric returned us to the stairs. I profess that I have never seen a bigger moon looming in a clearer sky. Raphael guided me back to the property and we walked in silence. When he left me at the door of my room I asked him if he would want his own body to be kept in such a way. He shook his head, laughing without a sound. "No," he said, "I am not nearly so important." With that we bid each other good night.

Of all the dread things I'd seen that night. I thought about the boy and his unblemished skin. That perfect skin.

To be forever a child...

Your loving brother,

Ambrose



23 June, 1881

Dearest Celeste,

I am disheartened that you have yet to send further responses to my reports. Fearful that my most recent missives have somehow become lost in their journey to your door, I include facsimiles — as best as I could recreate from memory. Please send word of the family's activities, for I miss them so! I do hope that you and William are well. Surely William has found a replacement to fill my station at the mill, especially given the season, but if not, I might send along my recommendations.

What mischief have the children devised for the holidays? They would certainly love it here, most especially the beaches.

Ah, but I must scold you. In all of your recollections of our youth in Sicily you never mentioned the oppressive heat of the summer months. All the candles in all the cathedrals are keen to melt without so much as a flicker. I've taken to wearing Raphael's old garments as they are much lighter than my northern attire.

I roamed the marketplace again this morning. The people have come to know not just my face, but my name as well. I am Ambrose of Sicily. Ambrose, the islander.

It is a good life.

Tomasso's wife is calling us to supper, so I must lay down my pen.

Yours,

Ambrose



9 July, 1881

Dearest Celeste,

My thoughts turn again to the boy in the crypt.

What affliction led to his demise and when did he expire? What had become of his parents? I imagined them young, grief stricken, holding each other tightly as they hurled themselves into the sea. Then I pictured them as in old age, creased with wrinkles and the layering of misery at the loss of a child so long ago. Or were they among the dead, buried in the hill? Did I unknowingly spy them frozen in their final moments tucked into the walls beneath the cathedral? Could they see their boy from their place?

I inquired for the child's story at Tomasso's table. None could tell me his name, but there was some debate of his village. His family, a good family, traveled many miles to attend mass in the cathedral on the hill. Raphael's eldest sister suggested that they were related to the clerics there.

"So that is how he came to be in the place," said Raphael. "We should be so lucky."

But what of the parents? Did anyone survive him?

"All dead," said Raphael's sister.

This was the end of our discussion. Tommaso quieted us, for such talk was impolite. We broke bread in silence.



Undated

Dearest Celeste,

You may not recognize my hand, may find my penmanship suddenly crude and unfamiliar, but I assure you that I remain ever yours, your little brother Ambrose.

I have much to relate.

I regret that I was forced to depart from the estate, and even now I write to you from a vessel departing the warm seas of Sicily. I pause now to steal one final look at her shrinking shores for I fear it will be my last glimpse of our heritage.

I must explain how it came to pass.

Two evenings ago I was roused from my sleep by the voice of an angel. To be clearer, the boy in the crypt was calling to me, imploring my aid. He reminded me so much of Edward – a name I agreed never again to mention in our communications, but it was little Eddie who I heard in the night! He was alone there with the sneering devils of the catacombs! I dressed quickly and hurried into the night, taking my walking stick and Raphael's satchel – he leaves it there by the door, so careless! Imagine the delight of a bandit to find such tools at his disposal, there at gate!

I knew the way to the cathedral well, for I have visited many nights in these last weeks. I had never dared to request entry without Raphael's company, but I confess that I was drawn to the place. But this night I was intent on doing the work of angels. Rapping on the door I called out to the cleric I knew to be there worshipping. He was confused at the sight of me. I must have been a fright, so frenzied as I was!

Our business was quick.

In moments I was descending the stairs, unafraid of the dark, unafraid of the contorted faces awaiting me in the chamber below. I was the great protector, a shepherd with his holy rod – where had I misplaced my walking stick? Time changed that night and moments are lost to me.

Then I was swallowed into the stillness of the gallery, audience again to the

leering ghouls shackled to the stone. His captors!

Little Eddie slept there in the thick of it. They would have him no longer! I lifted him from the cresh and held him close. He said not a word. A mass of straw tangled in spiders' silk trailed from the back of his head. I was quick to brush it away. Tufts of his golden hair fell to the stone floor and I suddenly felt a sharpness in my abdomen.

I crept back toward the stairs and through some trick of the light it appeared that the dead had all turned to appraise me. Then I heard the voice.

"You cannot undo what has been done."

I looked for the form of the old cleric, but I saw no one on the stairs. Then came a tapping, as of fingers against parchment.

There in the shadows I beheld a dark hand. It stood out amongst its fellows in that it was no withered talon. This hand was resilient, plump with lifeblood. It hung there like a glove from the leathery arm of a corpse. There was nothing remarkable about the figure other than that dangling hand. Not even the boy's skin was so perfect and alive

"What good can come by your hand?"

I held the boy closer. I heard a sickening crunch of brittle matter and his head lolled harshly to one side. I gathered it up, securing him. I gently brushed the hair from his face, but to my horror, I had scraped his cheek too roughly, revealing the bone that resided beneath.

"Yours is a hand that takes."

The fingers of that dark hand drummed against the wall. I looked up to see it

writhing against the tendons of its fleshless wrist. I do not think I knew what I saw.

“Yours is a wicked hand indeed.”

How could it have known? How does a man long dead in a foreign crypt know of my transgressions, of my frailties? Do the damned truly know all sins? “Who are you?” I demanded not of the corpse, but of the hand itself.

“I know what you are.”

I set the boy down on the floor. He was limp driftwood. He was a boy no longer asleep, but dead. Dead as he had always been. Though through my carelessness, he was imperfect.

Something within me lurched. I realized then that I had not looked upon my own hands since leaving England. Least of all, the one. I am aware of it, of course. I have written to you and I have fed myself. But I could not look upon the hand that had done those things.

Oh, Edward!

At once it was all I could see. My vile hand. My sin. I have sailed the wide world, but there was no vessel so swift that I could evade my own limb. Oh, Celeste! Your youngest son! Not so much older than that broken boy before me. Ruined by my hand and all the worse for having lived to remember it. This hand!

“What good can come by it now?”

More sickening than the sound of the dead boy’s splintering neck were the sounds of the dark hand freeing itself from its wrist then slipping down the length of rag and bone below. It lay there prone and writhing like a blind worm

forced out of its warren by the rain.

“A trade.”

It was not such a difficult choice. I recall the coldness of Raphael’s razor, there in the satchel where I needed it. I recall the first delicate cut and the warmth that spilled out. I recall my puzzlement at the whiteness of the bone — had I expected black? Last of all was the red which devoured me, the turning of the chamber itself, the clacking of the nails of my new appendage as it dragged itself toward me.

They found me there on the stone floor. “What have you done? What have you done?”

The cleric was dead at the door. Someone had struck him about the head with my walking stick.

I ran so very fast and so very far. When I reached the water, I did not know the place. I had arrived in some other port. I had nothing with which to pay for food or shelter or passage, but a man wading in the waters told me by the looks of me I had strong hands and could be of use to him. This was the first time I looked upon it, this new hand. It no longer talks to me. It is content to feel the sunlight again. It and my other limbs are in the service of this sailor called Paolo.

We will do well. We will do good.

As ever, yours,

Ambrose

About this Story: A Word from the Author

Without Edgar or Bram, we simply wouldn't be drumming these five glorious fingers of ours, now would we? Life, on the whole, would be far less Weird. After all, it was Poe who inspired not only the detective genre with his story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" but also the very idea of a detective as we know it today. As for Stoker, he didn't exactly invent the vampire as a literary and cultural touchstone, but Copernicus and Galileo didn't exactly invent the stars either. No, without these sullen-faced lads (the writers, not the stargazers) there'd be no directory of occult detectives. Xander Crowe the soda jerk is good for maybe an episode or two, but let's be thankful for the legacies of Messrs Stoker and Poe, that our intrepid hero might tangle with demons and not waffle cones. I wanted to take this opportunity with this second chapter (digital digit dos?) to rob their literary graves.

Inspired primarily by Stoker's *Dracula*, an epistolary novel, I decided to experiment with a narrative told entirely through letters. The initial challenge with this story was establishing a 19th century voice. Successful or not (I'll let you decide), it was prosaic cardio. A really intense workout. "I could get away with expressing this in five words, but Ambrose would probably want to shoot for 57." I was practically hemorrhaging clauses. But the greatest challenge was almost certainly sustaining an unreliable narrator and offering information at just the right clip to satisfy both clarity and character logic. Ambrose relates his story

in retrospect, but not at such a distance that he has the perspective of a literary narrator. He's also writing to a very specific audience; his sister Celeste. The reader isn't privy to Celeste's history with Ambrose, so there were times when I had to be vague. I reconciled all this by allowing Ambrose to be ridiculously dramatic, intent on chronicling his life and not simply relating the day's events. If he'd turned out more down to earth and modest I don't know what I would've done.

As for the mummies in Sicily, they're there by the hundreds. Really. You can buy tickets to visit them. Proof that a picture's worth even more than a thousand words, this plot was inspired by page 133 of the February 2009 issue of *National Geographic*.

--Paul Montgomery
Philadelphia, July 2009



Edgar Allan Poe



Bram Stoker

Wherever that terrible light shall burn,
Vainly the sleeper may toss and turn;
His leaden eyes shall he ne'r unclose
So long as that magical taper glows,
Life and treasure shall he command
Who knoweth the charm of the glorious Hand!

-- Thomas Ingoldsby, *Ingoldsby Legends*



Coming Soon from
Wormwood: A Serialized Mystery

Season 3, Vol. 1 - Wormwood & the Five Fingers of Glory

This five-part audio story anthology features thrilling pulp tales of Wormwood's Hand of Glory as it passes through the ages -- with a surprising twist that leads to a shocking Season Three revelation!

Season 3, Vol. 2 - Wormwood: Portraits

The denizens of Wormwood are a mysterious breed. This series of stand-alone vignettes delves into the untold secrets of the various characters featured on Wormwood, even as the town reaches its darkest hours...

Season 3, Vol. 3 - Wormwood: Revelation

All is revealed in "Revelation," the final epic arc of the award-winning podcast drama. Centuries-old mysteries are finally exposed to the light as the final fate of Wormwood is decided.



www.wormwoodshow.com

The Hand of Glory...

In occult lore, the Hand was cut from the corpse of a hanged thief and coated in virgin wax and the dead man's tallow. It is said to open any door. But how did the Hand of Glory come to have its fate entwined with the mysteries at the heart of Wormwood?

Discover the secrets of this arcane appendage once attached to occult detective Doctor Xander Crowe as we present: *Wormwood and the Five Fingers of Glory*; five thrilling tales of mystery and suspense that span the ages!

