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Johannes Cabal: The Fear Institute

Written by Jonathan L. Howard

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JOHANNES CABAL

the FEAR INSTITUTE

JONATHAN L. HOWARD

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Foreword: A Warning to the Curious

Gentle reader, what follows is the third novel in the series of stories concerning Johannes Cabal, a necromancer of some little infamy. There will doubtless be some of you have come here seeking some fanciful little tale for your amusement, to furnish you with a smile or two, perhaps even a giggle. You are fools, as are the benighted wretches who ever suffered the poor judgement to spawn you. What follows is, in truth, a horrible story of madness and corruption, of lost hope and new destiny, of vicious but stupid crabs. You will not read this and walk away untouched.

Or perhaps you will. People are so insensitive, these days. Once upon a time, all you had to do was finish a story with a revelation in the form of a single short declarative sentence paragraph in – and this was the powerful part – *italics* to shred the sanity away from anyone more psychologically vulnerable than a lamppost.

It was his own face.

Or . . .

There were still two glasses upon the mantelpiece.

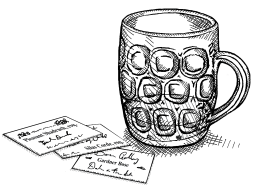
Or . . .

The library book was terribly overdue.

Not so these days. Everyone is so desensitised that the potency of artfully deployed italics has long been lost. It was good enough for H. P. Lovecraft, but apparently it isn't good enough for the modern world, filled as it is with obtuse bastards.

You know what? Forget the warning. Read the book. Go insane. See if I care.

JLH



Chapter 1

IN WHICH THE FEAR INSTITUTE VISITS AND CABAL IS CONFRONTED BY THE POLICE

It was not such a peculiar house in and of itself. A three-storey townhouse – four, if you counted the attic – Victorian in design, tall and thin and quite deep. To the fore, a short path ran from the door (to the left of the frontage) perhaps ten feet past what might have been intended as a rose garden in some long-past year. Now it was overgrown, but in a strangely artful way, as if chaotic minds had planned a new and not entirely wholesome horticulture for the little garden. Indeed they had, but we shall return to that aspect of the house shortly.

Although at one point it had clearly been a middle terrace house, its neighbours were no longer in evidence but for broken half-bricks protruding from the end gables. A single house, the lone survivor of a terrace, marked darkly with the smoke of nearby industrial chimneys, a short front garden

and a somewhat longer back one, the former bounded by a low wall, the latter by a tall one. Not a common sight, but neither one to excite much comment in the normal run of things. If, that is, it were sited within an industrial town or city. It was not.

The house rose solitary and arrogant on a green hillside some few miles from the next dwelling. The nearest factory chimney capable of layering the soot on the house was further still. If one were to see the house in its rural location, apparently scooped up by some Goliath and deposited far from its proper place, one might feel inclined to investigate, to climb the pebble and earth trail that leads to the garden gate, to walk up the flagstoned path beyond it, and to knock upon the door. After all, somebody must live there. The building is well maintained and smoke curls from its chimney.

This is an inclination to be fought at all costs, for this is the house of Johannes Cabal, the necromancer. There are all manners of unpleasantness about the place, but the front garden is the foremost.

Johannes Cabal was sitting in his study, making notes in the small black book that he customarily carried in the inside pocket of his jacket. They were pithy to the point of acerbity – Cabal was not in a good mood. That in itself was no rarity, but he was particularly ill-tempered today as his latest attempt to secure – which is to say, steal – a rare copy of de Cuir's very useful *Enquêtes interdites* had failed. Cabal was used to his frequent necessary descents into criminality coming to nothing, but it especially galled him on this occasion.

'*Verdammt* kobold,' he muttered, as he crossed a '7' with unnecessary vigour. He had faced many horrors in his life, many ghastly supernatural guardians, but this was the first

time he'd been bested by a blue goblin, especially one with poor diction.

The blue goblin (specifically – as may be understood from Cabal's mutterings – a Germanic form known as a kobold), had acted as a guardian of sorts for an unusual library. Where most libraries are content to sit by or near a road, this one had occupied a pocket existence of its own, slotted neatly between the world of men and the world of the Fey. It was an extensive and useful library, but it did not encourage lending or even browsing. After a few bruising encounters with heavy volumes flung at him from shelf tops, Cabal had discovered the book he sought and made a hasty but victorious retreat. His victory lasted exactly until the moment he had had the time and leisure finally to examine the looted book and found that it had unaccountably become a small manual on the subject of waterproofing flat roofs. He belatedly thought of the Fey's ability to alter appearances, and then he thought of a kobold vivisection, which cheered him up a little.

So absorbed in his writing and muttering was he that the pebble that bounced off the window failed to draw his attention. The second, thrown vigorously enough to threaten the glass, succeeded. Cabal sighed, put down his pen, took up his revolver and went to the window. Given that it was pebbles rather than bricks, and given that nobody who lived within ten miles would be so stupid as to irritate Cabal, who was not only a necromancer but, in the vernacular, 'an utter bastard', it seemed likely that the thrower was a child on a dare. Cabal intended to shoot to miss, albeit narrowly. He was therefore surprised when he saw three soberly dressed men standing on the other side of the garden gate. One looked like an undertaker and Cabal, who had had a similar experience once before,

checked his pulse just to be sure. Pleased to find he wasn't dead again, he went to the front door.

The three men, who had been watching the house with polite if slightly distant attention, now turned it upon Johannes Cabal. They saw a clean-shaven man with short blond hair, physically in his late twenties though he carried an air of cynicism and worldliness that would have seemed premature in a man twice his age. They saw his black trousers, black waistcoat, thin black cravat, white shirt, tartan slippers, and they saw his enormous handgun.

The last time Cabal had been to the gunsmiths' in town to buy more cartridges for it, the man behind the counter had told him that the pistol, a Webley .577 Boxer, was 'guaranteed to stop a charging savage', according to the literature. Cabal had replied he didn't know about that, but it could stop a Deep One with its dander up and that was good enough for him. The man behind the counter had considered this, and then talked about the weather. It was, in short, a fierce and unfriendly gun, and its very appearance was usually enough to cause nervous shuffling among spectators. The three men, however, seemed no more put out by it than by Cabal's slippers, and those hadn't caused any obvious consternation either.

Cabal considered. He did not encourage visitors, he had no colleagues *per se*, he had no friends, few acquaintances, and his family were all either dead, or had disowned him – or were dead *and* had disowned him. Occasionally other necromancers turned up to try to steal his researches in much the same way that he tried to steal theirs, or assorted self-elected paragons of virtue arrived to slay him as if he were a dragon. He was not a dragon; he was a much better shot than most dragons and the

paragons' last sight was of the fierce and unfriendly Webley .577 Boxer and Cabal's irked face sighting over the wide muzzle at them. The three men seemed to fit none of the categories. 'Who are you?' asked Cabal. 'What do you want?'

One of the party, a short middle-aged man with receding hair, snowy mutton chops, and the open, sanguine air of a defrocked priest spoke up: 'We wish to make you a proposal, Herr Cabal.'

'A proposal?' Cabal pushed his blue-glass spectacles back up his nose and regarded the trio suspiciously. 'What sort of proposal?'

'That,' interrupted the tall man in the top hat, who looked like an undertaker, 'is better discussed in private.' He pursed lips that looked well used to it. 'Our immediate concern is to reach your front door.'

'My front . . . ? Oh!' Cabal understood and laughed. He looked down. Just over the tile-ridged edge of the garden alongside the path was a faded circular for patios and conservatory extensions. There had probably been others, but they had blown away long since, this one staying only because it was trapped beneath a discarded human femur. The surface of the bone was pocked with tiny bite marks. He looked back up at the men, a sardonic smile on his face. 'You're concerned about the denizens of this little plot. Gentlemen! They are only pixies and fairies! You're not afraid of them, are you?'

'Yeah! We're harmless!' piped a tiny voice from beneath a hydrangea, until it was shushed by other tiny piping voices.

For his answer the tall man stepped back and read the notice on the gate out loud: '*No circulars, hawkers or salesmen. Trespassers will be eaten*. We are not afraid, sir. We are showing rational caution.'

'Yes,' conceded Cabal. 'Put like that, I see your point. Very well.' He spoke to the garden. 'Let these men by.' There was a muted chorus of dismay from the hidden watchers, but the three were allowed to walk up the path unmolested. By the time they reached the doorstep, Cabal had already gone inside.

He was waiting, seated, in his study when the three men caught up with him. They stood gravely clustered around the door, unable or unwilling to sit without their host's invitation. Cabal was entirely unaware of a host's duties, and contented himself by sitting with one leg crossed over the other and the pistol held idly in his lap. He looked at the men and they looked back at him for several uncomfortable moments. 'Well?' he said finally.

'My card,' said the funereal gentleman, producing one from his pocket and offering it. Cabal did not rise to take it, but suffered the man to advance, hand it over, and then withdraw in the manner of a priest delivering a votive sacrifice.

'Mine also,' added the third man, speaking for the first time. He had, to Cabal's eye, the air of a recovering alcoholic who now ran a small printing company dedicated to the publication of religious tracts.[1] He, too, had mutton chops, but these were black and as lustrous as a dog's coat. His eyes were quick and dark, and he wore the disreputable shortened form of a top hat known as a 'Müller'.

'Mine too!' added the one with the appearance of a disgraced priest.

Cabal studied the cards casually. 'So, you are Messrs Shadrach,' he thumbed the card from the top of the small pile

[1] It is illustrative of the workings of Cabal's mind that he readily associated religion and moral dissolution.

and allowed the funeral director's card to flutter to the floor, 'Corde,' he dropped the former alcoholic's, 'and Bose.'

'It's pronounced *Boh-see*,' said the unfrocked priest, although – disappointingly – it appeared from his card that he was actually a dealer in artworks.

'You were never a priest, were you, Mr Bose?' asked Cabal, just to be sure. Mr Bose shook his head and looked confused and that was that.

Mr Corde was – equally disappointingly – a solicitor and not a reformed alcoholic publisher of religious screeds, but Mr Shadrach really was a funeral director. This also disappointed Cabal, whose grave-robbing activities in search of research materials were often complicated by the eccentricities of those who carried out the burials. One doesn't want to spend all night excavating down to a coffin only to discover that it is lead-lined, sealed with double-tapped screws, and proof against crowbars.

'All very good, but none of which answers the question that I believe I implied when I said, "Well?" An art dealer, a solicitor, and a funeral director. What business have you with me, sirs? Indeed, what business have you with one another?'

'We belong to a society, Herr Cabal. A very special society, dedicated to a noble but arcane purpose. It is this purpose that has brought us to your door.'

Cabal looked at them with a raised eyebrow. '*Grundgütiger*! You don't all want to be necromancers, do you? It's thankless work, gentlemen. I advise you strongly against it.' Their blank expressions assured him that, no, this was not the purpose of their visit. 'Well, what, then?'

'Let us start from a hypothesis, Herr Cabal,' said Mr Bose, with wheedling enthusiasm. 'And let that hypothesis start

from a question. Is the human creature as perfect in function as it might be?'

'Meaningless,' replied Cabal, 'with no definition as to what that function might conceivably be. We are good communicators, passable runners, middling swimmers, and poor at flying.'

'Just so. But even there, we are capable of communications of great subtlety over very long distances, we build locomotives that can outrun the fastest animal, steam launches that can give even dolphins a good run for their money, and aeroships that have formed our conquest of the skies. You see my point, of course. But do you take my greater meaning?'

'*Natürlich*. You are suggesting that the function of the human creature, to use your phrase, is to adapt itself to its environment or even to adapt its environment to itself by virtue of its intelligence. Then my answer is no. Humanity is nowhere near perfection even with regard only to its intellect. Have you ever looked at your fellow man? It is not edifying. I have hopes that time and evolutionary forces may improve matters or, failing that, eliminate us and give something else a chance. I think the insects deserve a turn.'

'But in the shorter term, how may we improve ourselves?'

Cabal shrugged. 'Eugenics. Kill the lawyers. Vitamins. There have been all manner of suggestions.'

Corde had been growing visibly exasperated with Bose and cut in: 'Think rather in terms of what limits us, Herr Cabal. What holds us back in our everyday lives? What Mr Bose is trying to say is that our little society seeks to eliminate the most profound of all these limiting factors.'

'Death,' replied Cabal, without hesitation. 'You *do* wish to become necromancers.'