



## The Three Impostors and Other Stories

*Arthur Machen, S.T. Joshi (Introduction)*

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## **The Three Impostors and Other Stories** Arthur Machen , S.T. Joshi (Introduction)

Some of the finest horror stories ever written. Arthur Machen had a profound impact upon H.P. Lovecraft and the group of stories that would later become known as the Cthulhu Mythos. This first volume of Chaosium's Arthur Machen collection begins with the chilling "The Three Impostors" in its complete form, including the rarely seen sections "The Decorative Imagination" and "The Novel of the Iron Maid." Rounding out the first volume are "The Great God Pan," "The Inmost Light," and "The Shining Pyramid," all are excellent tales.

Introduction by S.T. Joshi.

## **The Three Impostors and Other Stories Details**

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## From Reader Review The Three Impostors and Other Stories for online ebook

### Melinda says

This was my first experience with Machen, and I find that I really like him. The book comes off in an intelligent fashion and you can tell how Machen was an influence to Lovecraft as they share that same creepy feeling and penchant for things that slither. The three imposters relate fantastic stories while searching for a single man that their master wants. The other name for this book is the Transmutations, which will make sense after hearing the stories. I really enjoyed the language and plotting. The imposters are diverse and imaginative. Even though the ending is rather abrupt, I would recommend this to fans of horror and Lovecraft.

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### Martin says

Machen is, as should be, a little strange. Cerebral horror sure, but not particularly horrific. Quaint. Suspenseful build up to a reveal you probably see coming because you've been exposed to so much horror since this was written. So not scary, and nothing really is unless you believe it's possible. A little creepy perhaps. I like this sort of thing though, popularized now, or rather, exemplified in Lovecraft: ancient rites, old gods, horrible books --it's really more of a book lovers horror. Certainly a deranged lunatic with a knife is scarier, but a strange cult and an old book of unspeakable knowledge is so much more satisfying.

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### Mark R. says

\*\*\*1/2

"The Three Imposters and Other Stories" contains the title novel, plus the novella, "The Great God Pan," and two short stories, "The Inmost Light" and "The Shining Pyramid." I would rate the novella and short stories as four out of five, with the novel being a three.

The novel holds the same structure as the short stories, more or less, with one character (a man named Dyson in all but one of the stories contained in this book) investigating and being told a strange story by another character. The novel has Dyson and an associate of his being told stories by various characters, and the episodic nature of the novel even allowed for some of these stories to be published on their own in the late 1800's.

I was not familiar with Arthur Machen before reading this book, and only knew that his early work (represented here) was an influence on Lovecraft. That's certainly obvious after reading the first story, "The Great God Pan," with its themes of gods and monsters just beyond our world, able to be seen by those who can manage to get through to the "other side." The editor of the book provides some valuable commentary (at least, valuable to someone like me, who doesn't always pick up on everything right away), and points towards some Lovecraft stories which were influenced by Machen's writing (one that occurred to me, which he didn't mention, is Lovecraft's "From Beyond," of which "The Great God Pan" reminded me).

I like the style of Machen's writing and will probably pick up another collection of his in the near future. The episodic and sometimes confusing nature of the novel made it a little less enjoyable to read than the short stories, but overall, this is definitely a good collection.

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

*The Three Imposters* is a strange little book, a narrative about a secret society's efforts to retrieve a Roman coin ("The Gold Tiberius"), but this "novel" appears to be little more than a convenient device for telling a series of marvelous, horrific tales. Two of these tales--"The Novel of the Black Seal" and "The Novel of the White Powder"--are first-class works of imaginative fiction, and the entire book itself is entrancing, reminiscent of Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights* in its descriptions of London--conveyed in musical, Swinburneian prose--make of this nineteenth century metropolis something as exotic and fantastic as the Baghdad of Haroun al-Rashid.

In addition, this collection contains not only two short stories but also the novella "The Great God Pan," one of the acknowledged classics of the weird tale. Its Chinese box structure--the horror revealed in fragments, in various voices, with lacunae which must be supplied by the reader--makes the narrative all the more compelling and terrifying in its obliqueness. (Lovecraft used this structure as his model for "The Call of Cthulhu.") "The Great God Pan" has an interesting plot as well, in that it is an inversion of the Ripper murders which occurred only a few years before. Instead of lower-class women murdered in the slums by an unknown male slasher, we have wealthy young men committing suicide in the most fashionable sections of London--and this time a mysterious woman seems to be involved.

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### **Katherine says**

I'm a lover of Victorian fiction and a newcomer to the horror and weird fiction genre and found this book to be an absolute delight.

These fantastic tales are firmly placed in the urbane and modern life of Victorian London, in particular the regularity of the new suburbia, and the scepticism of the scientific man, which sharpens the contrast to the tales of the uncanny, providing a troubling hint of darker currents beneath daily life and a darker nature constrained within each of us.

There is a strand of humour that runs through the book, acknowledging the relish we take in the tall tale, the gruesome and repulsive. And this unexpected lightness means the denouement of the stories – that blank moment of revulsion, when the horror is finally revealed – became, for me, even more effective for being somewhat unexpected.

My edition includes a selection of contemporaneous reviews that absolutely made my day: 'Mr Machen gave to the world a most gruesome and unmanly book. I should like to know how the imagination of the author would work upon clean and wholesome lines.'

In the end, the motives of the impostors in engaging with Dyson and Phillips are not fully explained – hinting at sinister machinations and manoeuvring running beneath our everyday lives. Good fun.

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## William2.1 says

I bought *The Three Imposters and Other Stories* because Jorge Luis Borges put it in his 75-title list: "Prologues to a Personal Library" (Selected Non-Fictions, Penguin, 2000). So far, I have finished only the title novella. It was published in 1895 in UK, so the diction has its moments of old world British punctilio, but these are certainly no worse than anything found in other prominent Victorian writers. For the most part the narrative is beautifully compressed and the action brisk. I generally do not read mysteries or stories of the occult unless they are by Edgar Allan Poe and one or two others, and reading this collection I was reminded why. For all its delights there is a weakness in the middle of the book that I found rankling. It appears in the chapter titled "Novel of the Black Seal." Despite the otherwise vivid writing there is a tendency here to display horror not through the depiction of the horrible, but by a rising hysteria and frenzy among the main characters. The reader is left wondering why everyone is so frightened. It's this one section then, the longest in the book, in which the narrative fails. A second annoying habit in this section is a relentless withholding of information. Now this is something that all writers of fiction do to keep us guessing what will happen next. But Machen is so chintzy with even the smallest particle of rationale that it's a little maddening. Whenever the text calls for him to come clean, he squirms out of doing so through some cheap device or other. This is trickery, and bad writing. But mixed with these are fine moments, especially Machen's clarity of voice and vivid detail, that satisfy deeply. So recommended with reservations.

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## Doug says

Ok, I've gone back and forth and thought about this review. I have not read the second volume (will soon), but this is how it seems to me. This book contains two important works: "The Great God Pan" and The Three Impostors. "The Great God Pan" is something of misstep that mashes together two different short stories. The first, and smallest, is the best: a scientist opens up the doors of perception and the horrible truths of the Outside comes pouring in. The second, the bulk, deals with sexual horrors and is basically how bad a particular woman is (because of, you know, sexual horrors). Toss in a small twist to bring them back together and you have a satisfying, but potentially so much more, product.

The Three Impostors? You could write an entire book of discussion about what is meant and what could have been implied. A series of stories inside of stories are told, some with stories inside of them, many with a horror bend, and all linking back, however falsely and tentatively, with the search for a young man with spectacles and a gold coin. Of the various interlocked tales (four of which are pitched as "novels", fantastical stories told by one character to another), the two most important are "Novel of the Black Seal" and "Novel of the White Powder". "Seal" deals with hidden truths and the unknown things hidden in the history of man, and is very important to what is usually recognized as Lovecraftian horror. "Powder" is much more classic horror, a white powder that helps a overzealous student of law regain some zest and *vivre*. Except it goes awry. Right up there with "Colour out of Space" (Lovecraft) and "Voice in the Night" (Hodgson) as a classic of the consumed-from-within horror.

The four novels and five or six "real" tales of The Three Impostors are subtitled "The Transmutations", and most of the stories involve some element of things changing. However, the connection between the storylines and change can be tenuous in places. I think I get it, but I wouldn't be absolutely sure.

As for the remaining, more minor tales, you have "The Inmost Light" and "The Shining Pyramid". "The Inmost Light" is interesting, but at its core is a coincidence that makes the entire oeuvre of Dickens sound plausible. If the whole thing was written in reverse sequence (except the end would still be the end), it would be better. "The Shining Pyramid" has some neat mysticism, but is done better in "The Novel of the Black Seal".

Which brings me to the bit that involves the second volume of Joshi's Machen compilations. From what I have heard, "The White People" is the key piece of that. It seems like "Inmost" or "Pyramid" could have been culled and "The White People" put in its place to make a definitive Machen weird tale single volume with a second volume aimed at more completist ventures.

Still, the bookends--"Pan" and Impostors--are very worthy tales and I'm sad it took me this long to read them.

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### Oscar says

El galés Arthur Machen (1860-1947) fue todo un referente del género de terror. Su literatura está fuertemente enraizada por lo religioso y lo pagano, y sus escenarios están muy próximos a la Naturaleza. Y es que el folclore está muy presente en sus relatos, cuya imaginación sugiere leyendas y mitos, hadas y gnomos por igual. Algunos de sus cuentos, como 'El pueblo blanco', 'El sello negro' o 'El polvo blanco', están considerados como clásicos indiscutibles. En palabras de H.P. Lovecraft: *"Entre los creadores actuales del miedo cósmico que han alcanzado el más alto nivel artístico son pocos los que pueden compararse con Arthur Machen. Su poderosa producción de horror, a finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX, sigue siendo única en su clase y marca una época distinta en la historia de este género literario"*.

En 1895, Arthur Machen publicó 'Los tres impostores', original libro compuesto por diversos relatos entrelazados. En esta novela corta, se nos presenta a Mr. Phillips y Mr. Dyson, donde este último se verá envuelto en un extraño suceso relacionado con un Tiberio de oro. A partir de aquí, estos dos caballeros ingleses se irán encontrando con los personajes más variopintos, cuyas vivencias pasarán a relatarles, siempre en torno a hechos sobrenaturales, misteriosos y macabros. Y lo más curioso es que todo parece girar en torno a un enigmático joven moreno con anteojos.

El lector, al igual que Dyson y Phillips, se convierte en un mero testigo de las historias que les son transmitidas, tal que si de un cómplice se tratara. A través de la prosa y de la atmósfera de misterio desplegadas por Machen, iremos avanzando, en un *crescendo* cada vez más macabro, hasta el desenlace final, que cerrará el bucle.

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### Tegghiaio says

Sin saber nada absolutamente sobre este libro de Arthur Machen antes de embarcarme en su lectura, al finalizar la primera historia de este libro, titulada *La aventura del Tiberio de oro* me sentí un tanto decepcionado creyendo que se trataba de una colección de historias cortas en las que lo habitual serían los finales insatisfactorios en cada una de ellas.

No obstante, las siguientes historias me permitieron entender que cada una de ellas estaban entrelazadas y formaban parte de un gran todo en donde lo fantástico y lo terrorífico se mezcla con la realidad de dos amigos de vida bohemia y relajada que se ven involucrados en esta red tejida por los tres personajes presentados en el prólogo.

Mis favoritas fueron *La novela del sello negro*, *La novela del polvo blanco* y, por supuesto, *Historia del joven de anteojos*, aunque todo el libro presenta un gran nivel y la emoción y la intriga nunca decaen. A mi parecer se trata de una lectura obligatoria para los amantes del género.

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### **Jenny says**

The Three Impostors reminds me of a nineteenth century Pulp Fiction with its collection of little narratives with their intriguing titles - The Gold Tiberius, The Novel of the White Powder and so on. It is a tale of coincidence, perhaps supernaturally arranged, that embroils itself around two young friends Dyson, the cynical writer, and Phillips, the fanciful scientist, after they find a coin of legendary value. For fans of the Victorian Gothic, Machen is essential and The Three Impostors is a great example - decadent, heathen and genuinely creepy.

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### **Jonas Wilmann says**

I had previously read The often anthologized 'The novel of the white powder' and 'The novel of the black seal' and was looking forward to experiencing this collection of short stories in its entirety.

The book consist of several short horror stories (woven into a frame story) told to Phillips and Byron, the one a determined rationalist and the other somewhat a dreamer. Thematically the stories revolve around the decay of moral and the arts, somehow connected to a secret society possibly worshipping sloth roman emperor Tiberius and the decadent creature of mythology, Pan (My own point would be that the real devil behind the flattening of culture, moral decay etc. is a much more well known character: Plain Stupidity).

The frame story seems too constructed at times, strained even; a good example is the build up to 'The novel of the black seal': 'My brother is missing, and oh, on a completely different note, here's a story about a professor of ethnology and some secret snakelike subspecies of humanity'.

But when all that is said, 'The three impostors' is still a strong work of fiction. The two aforementioned short stories are classics within the genre and the lesser known 'The novel of the dark valley' also deserves mention.

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### **Simon says**

I have long eagerly awaited reading something by Arthur Machen. Supposedly one of the grandfather's of Weird fiction, an important influence on H.P. Lovecraft, I was hoping for another author of the same caliber (and perhaps somewhat similar to) Algernon Blackwood. He turned out not to be quite quite as good and

somewhat different in approach.

This is volume one of a three volume set and contains the novella "The Great God Pan", two short stories "The Inmost Light" and "The Shining Pyramid" and the novel "The Three Imposters". Edited and introduced by S.T. Joshi. Common themes include the corruption of innocence, scientific endeavour in areas of the supernatural and the mysteries and beauty of late 19th century London.

"The Great God Pan" is one of the stories Machen is famous for but I was somewhat underwhelmed. Apparently deeply shocking and controversial in its time, there were angry reviews and morally outraged critics in the media, today it feels overly restrained and coy. In other words it hasn't dated too well, lacking the effectiveness they might once had. The other two short stories are in the same vein; good but haven't dated too well.

Somewhat different though is the novel "The Three Imposters" (subtitled "The Transumation"). I don't know if I have ever read a story with such a complex narrative structure. Divided up into a series of episodes, it contains many complete stories within stories that are related by one of the three antagonists to either of the two protagonists in as part of their elaborate and convoluted attempts to try to track down another character who is on the run. The narrative reached, at times, four levels deep. The two protagonists are wealthy individuals who were born into money and who have nothing more to do with their time than wandering the streets of London, reflecting upon and discussing esoteric matters, furiously smoking their pipes as they keep running into the three antagonists, in various guises, who proceed to relate dubious stories of the supernatural.

The prose is quite purple, noticeably more so than Blackwood (although these tales were written at least ten years earlier) and (as I said) feel more dated. I do intend to go on and read the other two volumes in this series to see what else this author has to offer.

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### **Chumbert Squurls says**

Three strange people are introduced an artist, a slob, and a woman. Each is haunted by a dark past and desperately searching for a deceptively harmless young man in spectacles. This is the common thread in a series of short stories told to two scholars by strangers in turn-of-the-century London. The two pretentious scholars are ensnared in what at first seems to be a series of unlikely coincidences that turns out to be an intricate conspiracy of deception where lies are traded like currency and where secrets hide in plain sight. Although this premise is intriguing the mythos Machen has created is only a starting point for Lovecraft to perfect. The writing is dull and over-ornamented, but Machen's inventive concept nearly hits its target. A must for Lovecraft fans.

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### **Jeff Cavadrio says**

"Entre los creadores actuales del miedo cósmico que han alcanzado el más alto nivel artístico son pocos los que pueden compararse con Arthur Machen. Su poderosa producción de horror, a finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX, sigue siendo única en su clase y marca una época distinta en la historia de este género literario". -H.P. Lovecraft.

Leer a Machen ha sido de las experiencias más placenteras que se puedan tener al leer.

Nos encontramos ante una magnífica novela con una sublime estructura y una historia donde, tanto los dos protagonistas como nosotros los lectores, tenemos el papel de espectadores. La meta-narrativa, que tiempo después Lovecraft adaptaría a gran parte de sus relatos, hace de esta obra un libro con distintos matices en los que predominan los detallados ambientes melancólicos y el folklore. Machen siempre nos mantiene en suspense y, en cada sub-trama, el terror cósmico se hace más intenso.

Lo último que diré es que esta novela cíclica es una obra maestra infravalorada, elogiada por Borges y que influyó en grandes maestros del terror como Lovecraft, Campbell, Howard y Stephen King. Y, en mi opinión, cualquier lector de terror debe hacerle una reverencia al gran genio que fue Arthur Machen.

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## Jim says

Every October, just before Halloween, I scan my shelves for some good fantasy/horror -- usually something from Dover Publications, who seem to have a lock on the field. This year, I read **Three Impostors** by the Welsh writer Arthur Machen. Although I finished the book just minutes ago, my mind is still reeling with what must be one of the most subtle and insidiously terrifying works of the genre I have ever read.

Picture to yourself a mysterious prologue, in which we are introduced to two men and a woman who are leaving a mysterious house in the suburbs of London. They discuss some act which was performed and move on. From another direction come the two main protagonists, Dyson and Phillipps, who take over from this point.

What follows are a number of chapters titled as if they were independent short stories; yet they are all interlinked. Two of the chapters contain substories, which Machen for some reason calls "novels," which have been frequently anthologized, namely, "The Novel of the Black Seal" and "The Novel of the White Powder." If these tales remind one of H. P. Lovecraft, it is no accident. In his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Lovecraft comments that they represent "perhaps the highwater mark of Machen's skill as a terror-weaver."

It is only at the end that we find out what has happened in the series of interlinked tales; and the reader, if he is diligent, winds up paging a second time through the book to see whether it all plays out. It does. Rarely have I encountered such a short novel with so many interwoven skeins.

I have remarked in other reviews about the **moral landscape** of G. K. Chesterton's tales, in which the sinister qualities of the landscape reflect in some way the moral flaws in the characters (usually of the villains). In Machen's work, on the other hand, the scenes where the action takes place vary widely and sometimes strangely inappropriately, considering what takes place. Machen's point seems to be that great mysteries underlie our lives:

I stand in a world that seems as strange and awful to me as the endless waves of ocean seen for the first time, shining, from a peak in Darien. Now I know that the walls of sense that seem so impenetrable, that seem to loom up above the heavens and to be founded below the depths, and to shut us in for evermore, are no such everlasting impassable barriers as we fancied, but thinnest and most airy veils that melt away before the seeker, and dissolve as the early mist of the morning about the brooks.

At one moment, the sun may be shining; at another, one is lost in evil, with the faerie folk and witches and

ogres bending our idea of what is real and proper into a cocked hat.

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### **Jennifer says**

I read selected bits of this collection - "The Great God Pan" and "The Novel of the White Powder" - last year as support material for a Lovecraft Book Club, but I didn't really settle down to get to know Machen until recently, when the imminence of the 2015 NecronomiCon reminded me that I'd promised not to show up to the convention again without having done all the reading. (And yes, I'm aware of how much geek was crammed into that sentence.) Due to their influence on Lovecraft, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, Clark Ashton Smith, and Lord Dunsany all made my homework list, and reading them in close conjunction has actually added something to my weird fiction experience, as it facilitates a comparison of just what each man (oh, so many men) considered "horror."

Machen's a bit like Blackwood in that he finds his terrors mostly in the natural world, however his forces aren't impersonal but rather more personally pagan ones that work to destabilize civilization by bringing out man's inner Pan - the instigating moment of the horror in the opening tale in the volume, "The Great God Pan," for instance, is a scientific experiment which leads to a young woman's almost ecstatic experience of the world around her. It's an interesting take, though perhaps not a surprising one for a Victorian.

Most of this volume is taken up by the tripartite "The Three Imposters," which reads a good deal differently as a whole than it does if you pick out individual pieces as I'd done previously. I'm not entirely certain the framing structure really works - other than to bring Machen's recurring characters Dyson and Phillips in for cameos - but the tales themselves are creepily enjoyable, though the unreliability of the narrators will leave you wondering how much of what you've just read you can really trust.

So far I've read two volumes of this three volume series from Chaosium, and I'm fairly comfortable advising all but the completists to just stick to the first one and then move on to something else. Machen's fun in small doses and definitely worth reading for his influence on later writers like Lovecraft and King, but I'm not sure you need to follow him through all his iterations... unless, like me, you're doing your geek homework.

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### **Jim Smith says**

If this book were expanded to include 'The White People' it would feature all of Machen's truly essential short horror fiction from his somewhat frustrating, but thoroughly fascinating career. The Great God Pan/The Inmost Light (published together) and The Three Impostors were the two books that cemented Machen's posterity as a 'horror writer', despite him not writing all that much in the genre otherwise, while The Shining Pyramid is just really damn frightening.

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## **Lance Greenfield says**

I did enjoy this story, the way that it was told, and the way that all of the threads were brought together in an horrific climax.

The style of writing reminded me of that of Arthur Conan Doyle, which should not surprise me, as he and Arthur Machen were contemporaries. The language is very descriptive and somewhat flowery. Occasionally, that gets a bit boring, but mostly it is, for me, beautiful prose.

There appear to be three main characters, but they converge on a fourth. There is much mystery and supernatural overtone.

Machen's anti-materialism shines through his characterizations. This provokes deep thought in the reader. At least, it did with me.

There are some quite scary parts to this book. A good producer could make a very good film of it. Perhaps they already have. I haven't looked into it.

All in all, I enjoyed the book, and swayed between three and four stars for it, but eventually settled on three because I found part of it to be a bit of a trudge through treacle. Sorry Arthur!

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## **David Davis says**

Excellent book. It was short stories but they all fit together. Two of my favorites were The Novel of the Black Seal and The Novel of the White Powder.

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## **Charles Dee Mitchell says**

When Arthur Machen's *The Three Imposters* was headed to press, John Murray, his London publisher, got cold feet. The year was 1895; the scandal of the Oscar Wilde trial was still fresh in the public's mind; and, Murray worried that Machen's depiction of pagan cults devoted to sex and murder might run afoul of the censors. He requested cuts. Machen reportedly changed one word. The book was published without incident.

Reading it today it is hard to imagine what the fuss would have been about. But Machen was known as a decadent writer. (I have unread on my kindle a 1918 appreciation of the author titled, *Arthur Machen: Author of Ecstasy and Sin.*) His most famous short story, "The Great God Pan", is as kinky as it off-putting in its presumption of male and class privilege. And the three imposters in this series of linked short stories are, once you can untangle the convoluted narratives, involved in some pretty horrible stuff.

But it is the sort of horrible stuff that now dominates horror programming on cable TV. Machen's depictions of grotesque horror are images that if caught them on a Saturday afternoon Chiller Channel viewing session I might note in passing looked pretty cool. They make for entertainment that is "of its day" rather than "dated."

Machen's love of London and its streets, alleyways, bachelor flats, and even its suburbs add much to his

tales. And there is some genuine comedy in his choice of characters, dilettantish young men of sufficient if limited means who remain clueless of the world they have stumbled into until the final gory revelation.

“My dear sir,” said Dyson, “I will give you the task of the literary man in a phrase. He has got to do simply this – to invent a wonderful story, and to tell it in a wonderful manner.”

Mr. Dyson is speaking for the author at this moment, but he is also setting himself up for some terrible shocks.

(I read a Dover edition that contained no other stories than the linked narratives of the title.)

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