It is all more strange than I fancied, he said at last. It was queer enough what I saw; a man is sauntering along a quiet, sober, everyday London street, a street of grey houses and blank walls, and there, for a moment, a veil seems drawn aside, and the very fume of the pit steams up through the flagstones, the ground glows, red-hot, beneath his feet, and he seems to hear the hiss of the infernal caldron. A man flying in mad terror for his life, and furious hate pressing hot on his steps with knife drawn ready; here, indeed, is horror; but what is all that to what you have told me? I tell you, Phillipps, I see the plot thicken; our steps will henceforth be dogged with mystery, and the most ordinary incidents will teem with significance. You may stand out against it, and shut your eyes, but they will be forced open; mark my words, you will have to yield to the inevitable. A clue, tangled if you like, has been placed by chance in our hands; it will be our business to follow it up. As for the guilty person or persons in this strange case, they will be unable to escape us, our nets will be spread far and wide over this great city, and suddenly, in the streets and places of public resort, we shall in some way or other be made aware that we are in touch with the unknown criminal. Indeed I almost fancy I see him slowly approaching this quiet square of yours; he is loitering at street corners, wandering, apparently without aim, down far-reaching thoroughfares, but all the while coming nearer and nearer, drawn by an irresistible magnetism, as ships were drawn to the Loadstone Rock in the Eastern tale.

My Personal Review:
Horror master Arthur Machen's crowning achievement, a still shocking compendium of interwoven short horror tales. In late 19th century London, a scientist and an unpublished writer join forces as amateur detectives in an attempt to solve a minor but puzzling mystery which ultimately leads to the discovery of a truly diabolical conspiracy. In the course of their investigations, the two men find themselves repeatedly surrendering their attention to a series of seemingly outlandish tales spun by an assortment of eccentric story tellers. The stories, which all deal with
imposture of some kind, are only tangentially related to each other, yet offer the somewhat bumbling sleuths important clues to the mystery at hand. Machen builds suspense slowly and methodically, masterfully leading the reader on to a completely unexpected, gruesome climax. Comical, tragic, sophisticated, violent, horrific, and even downright disgusting, THE THREE IMPOSTORS is a classic horror novel of sly deception and wit.

The 1995 Everyman paperback is the only critical edition of this remarkably rich book released to date, offering a scholarly introduction (by editor David Trotter) that carefully details Machen's main influences (chiefly Robert Louis Stevenson) and themes (imposture of various kinds, also derived from Stevenson). A short text summary nicely encapsulates the narrative's various twists and turns. Finally, a section entitled "Machen and His Critics" provides a welcome offering of mostly contemporaneous critical responses to this remarkable book; while many of these reviews were laudatory, quite a few passionately outraged quotes reveal just how shocking THE THREE IMPOSTORS must truly have been in its time.

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