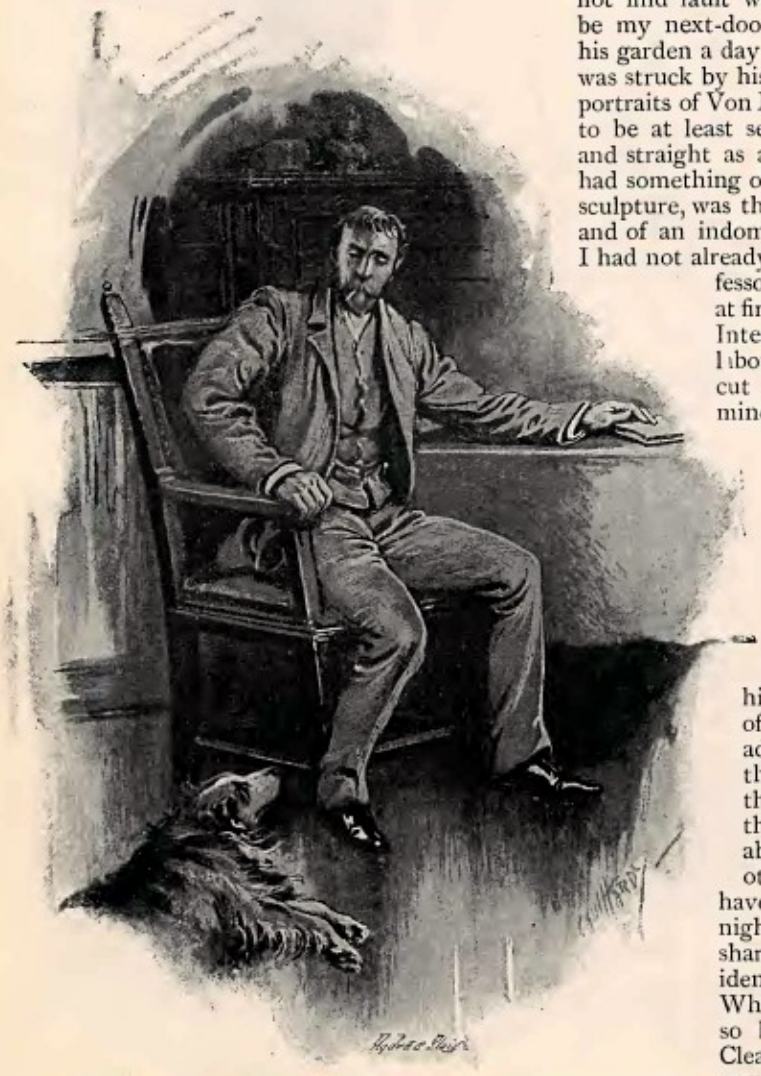
THE PURPLE DEATH.

BY W. L. ALDEN.

LAST winter I occupied a small villa in one of the towns of the Italian Riviera. To me it is a very delightful little town—partly, because it is extremely picturesque and, partly, because it is as yet almost unknown as a health-resort. You can live there without constantly hearing the cough of the consumptive, and when you do meet an occasional foreigner, he does not instantly begin to discuss the condition of his bronchial tubes, or to inquire as to the state of your own lungs.



"HE HAD HARDLY SUFFICIENT STRENGTH TO DRAG HIMSELF TO MY FEET."

Thank Heaven! my lungs and bronchial tubes are perfectly sound. My only trouble is insomnia, and it was for this that I sought the perfect repose and stillness of my sleepy little Italian town. There was but one other foreigner in the place, so I was told; and as I was assured that this foreigner was phenomenally strong and well, and was, moreover, a German, and hence presumably unable to converse with a man wholly innocent of any knowledge of the German language, I did not find fault with the fact that he was to be my next-door neighbour. I saw him in his garden a day or two after my arrival, and was struck by his singular resemblance to the portraits of Von Moltke. Although he looked to be at least seventy years old, he was tall, and straight as an arrow, and his face, which had something of the firmness and rigidity of sculpture, was that of a man in perfect health and of an indomitable constitution. Even if I had not already heard him called "the Professor," I should have known him at first sight as a man of culture. Intense thought and unremitting labour had chiselled those clear-cut features. I made up my mind that, instead of avoiding him, I should like to make his acquaintance, and I found myself hoping that he could speak English, or that, at all events, I could understand his French.

Twice during the first week of my residence next door to the German I saw after midnight a light in his garden, and heard the sound of a spade. It is one of the advantages of insomnia, that the patient learns to know the things of the night as well as those of the day. Had I been able to sleep as soundly as other people, I should never have noticed this mysterious midnight lanthorn or had my hearing sharpened sufficiently to note and identify the sound of a spade. What was the professor doing at so late an hour in his garden? Clearly, he could not have been engaged in gardening or ditching.

Even a German philosopher would not be capable of getting up at one o'clock in the morning to plant cabbages, or to improve the drainage of his garden. The only plausible explanation of his conduct was that he was engaged in burying something which he had reason for burying secretly. I knew that he lived absolutely alone, without a single servant. Hence, he could not be a murderer, who made a practice of burying his victims at night.

Then, again, he was a scientific person, and, of course, had no money for safe-keeping in the earth. The third time that I saw my neighbour's lanthorn in the garden, I discovered that I had an object in life, which was to find why he dug in the earth at an hour when, as he supposed, all his neighbours were asleep.

The mystery solved itself a few days later, and proved to be disappointingly simple. The arrival at my neighbour's door of a hamper of rabbits, and another of guinea-pigs, showed me at once that he was engaged in studies which involved the death of numbers of those unhappy little animals. Of course, when his guinea-pigs and rabbits had fulfilled their mission in life, it became necessary to bury their remains; and the professor wisely performed this task at midnight in order not to offend the prejudices of those curious people who believe that vivisection is merely a form of vice in which inhuman men indulge purely for recreation. I had seen the professor, and I could have sworn that he was a kindly and gentle man. If his guinea-pigs and rabbits were cut down in the prime of life, I felt sure that they died in the interests of humanity, and their fate gave me no pain.

My acquaintance with the professor—whom I will call Professor Schwartz, for the reason that it was not his name—grew up gradually. We began by exchanging polite commonplaces over the garden wall, and I found that he spoke English perfectly. We were both methodical in our habits, and were accustomed to smoke in our gardens every afternoon at about the same hour. Gradually we passed from the discussion of the weather to more interesting themes, and, finally, the professor accepted my pressing invitation to come and inspect a plant growing in my garden, of the name of which I was ignorant. When I returned his visit, I accidentally discovered that, like myself, he was a devotee of chess. That put the finishing touch to our acquaintance, and we fell into the invariable habit of playing chess, every evening, from seven to nine.

I found him extremely interesting. He was a physician, though he had long since ceased to practise medicine, and had devoted himself, so he told me, to the study of bacteriology. He was, moreover, a man of wide culture; and there seemed to be hardly any subject of which he had not a more or less thorough knowledge. But what charmed me in the man was his kindness of heart. His philanthropy was not bounded by any of the limitations of race or creed. The sufferings of the poor touched him as profoundly, whether they were Germans, Italians, or Frenchmen. His love for animals was unmistakable, in spite of the fact that he daily inflicted tortures on the unfortunate subjects of his experiments. I had a collie, between whom and Professor Schwartz a deep affection sprang up, and the man was never so happy as when the dog sat by him with its head resting on his knee. There is no reason why I should hesitate to say that Professor Schwartz came, in time, to be sincerely attached to me, for there can be no doubt of the fact. I wondered that such a man should live so completely alone; but once, when I spoke of the matter to him, he gravely replied that a man should live for the benefit of others, and that his studies were of much more importance than his pleasures could possibly be.

One day, my collie came into my room, evidently suffering the greatest agony. He was swelled out to twice his ordinary size, and he had hardly sufficient strength to drag himself to my feet, where he lay moaning. My first thought was of my neighbour's medical skill, and I rushed over to his house, and implored him to come to the aid of the poor dog. The man came instantly, bringing with him a huge bottle of some disinfecting fluid, and showing an agitation which surprised me in one who had spent so much of his life as a practising physician. The dog was dead when we reached the room where I had left him, and the professor instantly poured the entire contents of the bottle over the carcass, and then sent me for his spade. When I returned, he carefully removed the dog's body to the garden, and buried it, exercising the greatest care not to touch it, except with the spade. Then he went to his house, bidding me remain in the room where the animal had died, and when he returned he disinfected the room and everything in it with chemicals that caused a thick but entirely respirable smoke. To my inquiry as to what was the matter with the dog, he merely replied that the animal had been poisoned, and asked me if I had seen the dog digging in his garden. I had seen nothing of the kind, but I saw that the professor suspected that the animal had dug up the remains of some guinea-pig or

rabbit that had died of an extremely infectious disease. This explained the elaborate care with which disinfectants had been used, though I could not but think that my friend had been unnecessarily alarmed.

I had been acquainted nearly two months with this mild and lovable vivisectionist, when one evening our conversation fell upon Anarchism. The usual bomb had just been exploded in Paris, and I was expressing a good deal of indignation at the miscreants who did such things.

"The Anarchist means well," replied Professor Schwartz, "but he is hopelessly stupid. He attacks the wrong people, and he uses absurdly inefficient weapons."

"What do you mean by saying that he attacks the wrong people?" I asked.

"Just what I say," he replied. "The Anarchist wants to kill men who have money—capitalists, and small or great shopkeepers, and employers of labour. These are the very people who are most necessary to the existence of humanity. If the Anarchist tried to kill labouring men, he would be working for the emancipation of the race from poverty and misery, but he cannot see this."

"I hardly see it myself," said I. "Do you mean that the true way to lessen suffering is to kill the sufferers?"

"Yes, and no," said Professor Schwartz. "My dear friend, listen to me. All the poverty on this earth is the result of over-population. Why does the Italian labourer work for two francs a day, and spend his whole life in a state of semi-starvation? The Anarchist says that the labourer is oppressed by the capitalist. This is rubbish. A man works for two francs a day because there are so many workmen that the price of labour is wretchedly low. Halve the number of workmen, and you would more than double the wages of the remaining ones. The same thing is true of the men in this town who make a miserable living by raising vegetables. Each man has a little morsel of ground, and he can hardly raise enough to keep himself from starvation. Reduce the numbers of these small proprietors one-half, and you would double the amount of land which each one would cultivate, and thus double their aggregate incomes."

"That sounds very mathematical," I answered; "but I haven't that sublime confidence in figures that I had when I was younger."

"Any man who sees things as they are must admit," continued the professor, disregarding my interruption, "that the world is horribly over-populated. If a pestilence should sweep off two-thirds of the workmen in Europe, the survivors would be able to live in comfort. Now, the Anarchist doesn't see this. He would kill off the capitalists—the very men who employ labour, and make it possible for labourers to live. I, on the contrary, would not harm a single man who has money to pay to others, but I would remedy this fatal over-population—an evil which grows worse and worse every year. Your English Malthus had a glimpse of what was coming, but he did not foresee what the remedy would be."

"Then, there is a remedy?" I asked.

"Yes. Did I not tell you that the remedy is to reduce the working population? The man who discovers how to do this most swiftly and effectually will be the greatest benefactor this world has ever known."

It rather amused me to hear this man, whom I knew to be gentle and tender-hearted, actually insisting that about one-half of the population of the globe ought to be murdered; but I thought little of it at the time. I knew how fond some men are of propounding bold and startling theories, which they themselves would be the very last to dream of carrying into action. Here was a man, whose business in life had been to heal the sick, and so to prolong the existence of the weakest specimens of the human race. And now he was saying that the extermination of millions of healthy, vigorous men was the one thing that the world needed! It was another illustration of the inevitable bee which, sooner or later gets into the bonnet of every scientific man.

I have said that Schwartz lived completely alone. A man in good health can do this, but if he is taken ill he soon finds that he must depend on the help of others. One afternoon Professor Schwartz did not appear in his garden, and when I went to his house, in the evening, he did not come as usual to open the door. Suspecting that he was ill, I went to the side of the house, where I knew his room was situated, and called to him. He answered, but without showing himself at the window. He was not quite well, he said, but assured me that he would be able to see me the next day, and that in the meantime he should want no assistance. He would not consent to see me; and I went back to my villa somewhat uneasy, and half determined to break into Schwartz's house the next morning in case he still refused to open the door.

That extreme measure, however, did not prove to be necessary. When I called at his house in the morning, he opened the door, and invited me to come in. He was looking

wretchedly ill, but he assured me that his attack was over, and that there was not the slightest cause for uneasiness. He took me into his library, and tried to converse with his usual ease. The attempt was a failure, and I saw that, besides being weak from the effect of his illness, he was both preoccupied and troubled. Finally, I asked him frankly to tell me what was the matter, and to permit me to be of any service that might be possible.

He remained silent for a little while, and then he said—

"My dear friend, I have made up my mind to trust you. My illness has shown me that it is no longer safe for me to keep my secret absolutely to myself. I shall die suddenly, and possibly very soon. In that case there must be someone who will know how to prevent the catastrophe which would otherwise happen to this pretty little town, where I have spent so many happy hours. Give me your word that what I shall tell you shall remain a secret so long as I live."

I gave him the desired promise—rashly, as I now know, but without dreaming of its nature.

He rose from his chair and told me to follow him into his laboratory. There was nothing remarkable in the appearance of the place. I had once before seen the laboratory of a bacteriologist, and it closely resembled Professor Schwartz's laboratory, except that the fittings of the latter were rather more elaborate and complete. On one side of the room was a series of shelves filled with carefully-sealed glass tubes, containing what I assumed to be gelatine. Schwartz called my attention to these, and said—

"'LOOK AT THAT TUBE NUMBERED 17'" (*p.* 116).

"If you should find me dead, or dying, some day, I want you to take every one of these tubes, break them one by one in a bucket full of the liquid which you will find in yonder glass jar, and then bury the contents of the bucket, glass and all, in the earth not less than four feet deep. Do this with the utmost care, making sure not to break a single tube except under the surface of the liquid, otherwise I cannot answer for your life. You perfectly understand me?"

"Perfectly," I said; "and I will promise to carry out your wishes. The tubes, I presume, contain the microbes of various diseases."

His face lightened up with a glow of enthusiasm. "They contain the microbes of diseases," he replied; "but the diseases are nearly all new. They are inventions of my own, and some of them are infinitely more deadly than any disease known to the medical profession. You remember the death of your dog? The poor fellow died of a disease which is absolutely new, and which kills in less than six hours. If that disease were once introduced into any city in the world, it would spread so rapidly that in a week the place would be depopulated."

"I do not understand what you mean by newly-invented diseases," said I. "How is it possible for a man to invent a disease?"

"Allow me to sit down," said the professor, "for I am too weak to remain standing. The answer to your question is very easy. Certain diseases are produced by certain microbes, and hitherto bacteriologists have confined themselves to trying to discover the specific microbe of each disease, and then to discover a remedy that will kill the microbe without killing the patient. No one but

myself has ever tried to develop the deadly powers of known microbes. Look at that tube numbered 17. It contains the microbe of typhoid fever, but I have cultivated it until it will produce the disease in twenty-four hours after the microbe is taken into the system, and will kill the patient infallibly in twelve hours more. That is only one of the dozen similar successes that I have obtained. Then I have crossed different microbes, or rather cultivated them together, so that they have become capable of producing a new disease, partaking somewhat of the character of each of the diseases which the same microbes, if cultivated separately, would produce. It was I who invented, in this way, the present variety of influenza, by crossing the microbes of malarial fever with those of pneumonia. I was living in St. Petersburg at the time, and I accidentally dropped the tube containing the germs of influenza. Someone must have found it and opened it, for when the influenza broke out I instantly recognised it as my own invention."

"I have always heard," I ventured to remark, "that the influenza is a disease which has appeared in Europe several times during the present century."

"There have been epidemics of a disease called influenza," he replied, "but they differed from the present one. They lacked the symptoms of malarial poisoning, which are characteristic of my own influenza. I have always been very sorry that I lost that tube, for an epidemic of influenza can do no possible good, and does great harm. But to come back to what I was saying before we spoke of influenza. Look at tube number 31. It contains microbes that will produce a disease having some of the characteristics of hydrophobia, and some of those of dropsy, while it also has symptoms which are entirely new. It was one of the earliest of my new diseases, and would certainly be very efficacious, should it ever become epidemic. I have, however, invented other diseases which are far superior to it. Here is a tube," he continued, taking it almost lovingly in his hand, "which contains my *chef d'œuvre*. The microbes are a cross between those found in the venom of the tuboba, the most deadly of all known serpents, and those of the Asiatic plague. By the way, I am the first man to discover the existence of microbes in snake-venom. I call the new disease which these crossed microbes produce the 'Purple Death,' for the reason that the body of the person who is attacked by it becomes purple before death. It kills in less than thirty minutes, and there is no remedy which has the slightest effect upon it. As to its infectious qualities, it is the king of all diseases. If I were to break this tube while we are in this room together, you and I would be dead within an hour, and from this house the infection would spread so rapidly that in two days, at furthest, not a human being would be left alive in this poor little town. Think what would happen, were we Germans to use these microbes in our next war with France. A single bomb filled with the Purple Death, and thrown within the lines of a French army, would render a battle an impossibility. Before six hours were over there would not be left in an army of four hundred thousand men survivors enough to bury the dead!"

The man's eyes sparkled with pride. His weakness had almost vanished while he was talking, but suddenly he sank back on his chair, and feebly begged me to assist him into the other room.

When he was lying on the sofa, and had somewhat regained his strength, I asked him what possible good he expected to accomplish by adding to the number of diseases which already afflicted humanity.

"I have told you," he said, "that I am a philanthropist, only, unlike other philanthropists, I have intelligence and, I hope, the courage of my convictions. You have heard me say that all the poverty and misery of the world are due to over-population. Well, I have there in my laboratory the remedy for this evil. I can, with merciful swiftness and with absolute certainty, reduce the population of Europe to a half, or a third, of what it now is. I have only to take my Purple Death, and scatter the teeming gelatine on the side-walk of the most crowded street of your London. It will dry quickly, and under the trampling of hundreds of feet it will become pulverised, and the particles will float in the air. That very day the physicians will find themselves in the presence of a disease wholly unknown to them, and against which medical science can achieve nothing. In a few days London will be silent. The working-classes and the poor will be dead, and everyone who can possibly fly from the stricken town will have fled. When the pestilence has spent its force we shall hear no more of the unemployed workmen in London. There will be more work than workmen can be found to do, and the very street-sweepers will receive wages that will permit them to live almost in luxury.

"Or say that I wanted to decrease the population of Berlin. I simply place some of that gelatine in an envelope, and send it through the post to the head workman in some factory. He opens it, and the Purple Death breaks out among the workmen.

Nothing can stop it until it has run its course. Of course, a percentage of capitalists and employers of labour will fall victims to the disease, but its ravages will be chiefly confined to those who have not the means to escape from the city. Did I not tell you that the Anarchists select the wrong victims, and that their favourite dynamite is absurdly ineffective in comparison with the weapons that I can use. Now you see that I told the truth. Man, the lives of half Europe are in my hands!"

I made no reply. The vastness of the man's horrible scheme stunned me. I had not the least doubt that he spoke the truth, and I had promised to remain silent while his devilish project was carried out.

Presently he resumed—

"I do not want my weapons to fall into hands that would use them ignorantly. That is why I have asked you to destroy every one of those deadly tubes in case I should die without having been able to do it myself. I made the discovery yesterday that I may die at any minute, and I am physician enough to be sure of what I say. If I should find myself dying, and should have the time and strength to act, I should set this house on fire, and blow out my brains. So if you should happen to find my house burning, you

"I CARRIED THE BUCKET INTO THE GARDEN AND BURIED IT DEEP WITH ITS CONTENTS" (*p.* 118).

will take no measures to check the flames. But I fear that I shall not have the time to do this myself, and so I rely on your help."

"How long since you invented the Purple Death?" I asked.

A troubled look passed over Schwartz's face. "Nearly two years ago," he replied.

"Why have you delayed to use it?" I asked, a sudden hope that the man was not quite so mad as he seemed to be, springing up within me.

"As yet it has killed no one, beside the guinea-pigs, except your dog," he replied. "The dog must have been digging where the guinea-pigs are buried, and so contracted the disease."

"But why have you not carried out your scheme of depopulating the world during these two years?"

"My friend," replied the professor, "I am not so strong as I believed myself. The truth is, I have lacked the courage to begin the work. I have been like a surgeon whose nerves will not permit him to perform a painful operation, although he knows that it is the only means of saving the patient's life. But I shall delay no longer. I may have very little time to live, and, besides, now that I have told you all, my secret is no longer safe. Oh, I do not for an instant doubt your word, and I have perfect confidence in your friendship, but when a secret is known to more than one person it is no longer a secret. But I will have more courage. In another week I shall be as well as ever, and then I will begin the work of redeeming the world from poverty. Now I must ask you to leave me, for I must try to sleep. By the bye, you will find a duplicate key of my door hanging on a nail in the hall. Take it with you, and don't hesitate to use it in case of necessity."

I left the professor, and returned to my house, in a most unenviable state of mind. I had not the slightest doubt that what he had told me was strictly true. Granting that the man was mad—and surely no sane man could have calmly proposed the murder of hundreds of thousands of unoffending men—still the death of my dog was sufficient evidence that Schwartz's claim that he had invented microbic poisons was true. I had given him my word to remain silent. If I kept my promise I should be accessory to the crimes which he unquestionably meant to commit. If I betrayed him, I not only broke my word, but I made it certain that either he would be condemned to a madhouse, or would be sent to the gallows. I could not determine what it was my duty to do, and I spent a night of more terrible anxiety than any criminal ever spent who knew that the gallows awaited him in the early morning.

All night long, and far into the next day, I ceaselessly debated the question what ought I to do. Towards noon, not having yet heard any sound of life in my neighbour's house, I took the key, and, entering, went up to his bedroom. He was lying in bed, with the bedclothes drawn up close to his chin, and I spoke to him, but he did not answer. When I touched his forehead I found that he was dead and cold. He had evidently died soon after going to bed, for the body was already perfectly rigid.

I did not lose a moment in destroying the tubes in his laboratory. I placed them carefully, one by one, in a bucket filled with the disinfecting fluid which he had shown me, and broke them with a blow of a marble pestle. When this was done, I carried the bucket into the garden and buried it deep with its contents. I should then have been ready to send my servant to notify the authorities of Professor Schwartz's death had it not been for one thing. The tube containing the Purple Death was missing from its place on the laboratory shelf, and I had been totally unable to find it. So long as this remained above ground, all that I had done was comparatively useless. Doubtless the tube would be found by the officers whom the Syndic of the town would send to search the apartment, and take charge of the dead man's effects. Then it would be broken, purposely or accidentally, and the frightful consequences that Schwartz had predicted would be inevitable.

I searched every corner and cranny of the house without finding the tube. Finally I began to hope that the professor had himself destroyed it, fearing that he was near his end, but that he had been unable to destroy the rest of his poisons. Comforting myself with this solution of the mystery, I went to his bedside to smooth the bedclothes before sending for the police, and in so doing I found the Purple Death clasped firmly in his hand!

It was impossible to loosen the dead man's grasp, and, after vainly making the attempt, I gave it up, fearing to break the tube in the effort. I called my servant, and told him to go first for the village doctor, and afterwards to notify the police, and then I sat down to await events.

The doctor arrived promptly, and proved to be a very intelligent man. I told him the whole story that the professor had confided to me, with the exception that I did not hint at the use to which the dead man had

proposed to put his terrible inventions. The doctor found no difficulty in believing what I told him, and it evidently gave him a profound respect for his deceased *confrère*. He agreed with me that it would be dangerous to meddle with the tube which the corpse clasped in its rigid hand, and promised me that even if an autopsy should be necessary, he would see that the tube remained undisturbed. I think he was a little shy of coming too closely in contact with the body, lest the professor should have died of one of his new diseases. At any rate, he decided to accept my theory that Schwartz had died of heart-disease, and persuaded the Syndic that an autopsy would be quite superfluous.

Professor Schwartz was buried within twenty-four hours, with the Purple Death still in his right hand. The police were easily persuaded that it contained some holy relic, and that it would be impious to meddle with it. When the funeral was over, I left the place as soon as I could pack my boxes, and surrendered the lease of my villa. I have never seen it since, and never want to see it.

On my way back to England I passed through Berlin, where I went to see an eminent bacteriologist, and asked him how long microbes inclosed in a tube containing gelatine would retain their vitality. His answer was, "For ever, so far as is at present known." That answer has poisoned my whole life. Six feet underground, in the grave of Professor Schwartz, lies the Purple Death, waiting until the day when the cemetery will share the fate of all cemeteries, and be cut up into building lots. Then the tube will be exhumed and broken, and the pestilence that is to sweep away the teeming millions of Europe will begin its work. Sooner or later, this is morally certain to happen. I have sometimes thought of exhuming the coffin of Professor Schwartz, and searching for the fatal tube, but to do this would be to invite the catastrophe which I dread, for in all probability the tube has become unsealed by this time. My only hope is that an earthquake will some day bury the cemetery too deep for any spade to reach the grave of my poor mad friend.