

*New York, 1st May 1895*¹

Dear Sir,

I write to you in desperation. I wish to acquaint you with the plight of a friend of mine. Let me call him 'Jack'. Jack has a problem of a lunatic kind. Permit me to explain...

This time last year, Jack knocked on the door of my apartment and told me he had a wasps' nest in his brain. He claimed a queen had crawled into his ear one night several weeks before; now the chambers of his skull were filled with workers. Nothing I said would dislodge his belief – or the wasps. As for myself, I was sceptical, although I must admit that when I touched Jack's skull, to my amazement it was warm and fizzing. I proceeded to New York City Health Dept, who proved sympathetic but unhelpful. I was told a queen will take up residence in soft, rotting wood, wherever it may be found (which didn't say much for Jack's brain). The Health Dept insisted it restricted its insecticidal interventions to dwellings and business premises; it was forbidden to carry out any procedures on nests built inside living creatures, whether animal or human.

I subsequently tried a series of physicians – to no avail. They shook their heads and said Jack was ripe for the booby-hatch. This seemed to me an exaggeration, for in all other respects Jack's mind is sound. In the end I consulted a reputable alienist on Jack's behalf. The experienced doc claimed to have corresponded with Charcot in Paris on a similar case. The sole solution for the amelioration of Jack's condition would be to pretend to operate on him and remove the nest. The procedure

involved a full anaesthetic during which the patient's head would be shaved, and shallow incisions – in imitation of post-operative stitches – carved on the cranium to make the surgery appear authentic. I didn't think Jack would go along with an operation, but went along with it he did. The nest 'removed', Jack woke right as rain.

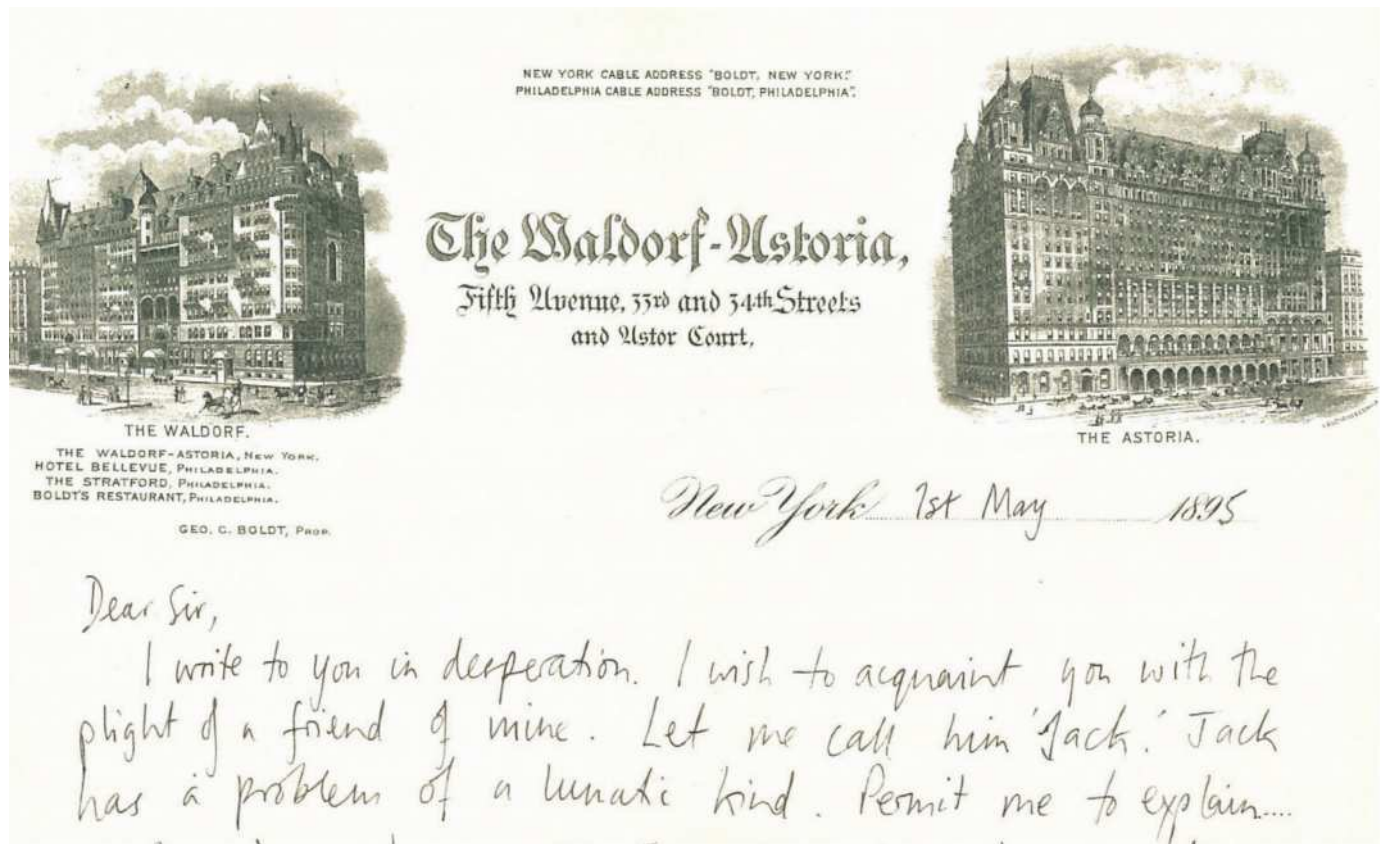
All was well for a year; Jack returned to his old, happy self. Then a few weeks ago he came to my apartment one morning in a panic. He had woken in the night hearing a wheezing and clicking in his chest. He's convinced a queen must've entered his nose some weeks before and made her way through his trachea into his lungs. He swears he now coughs up wasps in the night and finds them dead in his sheets. I saw no sign of any nest in his apartment. Mind you, Jack's no fabulist. He never drinks more than two shots of bourbon, and he's no dope-fiend. Also, when I place my hand on his chest I swear I can feel a fizzing beneath – in his ribcage.

You will, Sir, appreciate Jack's predicament, the thing is, operations are very costly, which is why I'm writing to you – as an eminent publisher in England – for a small contribution to his treatment.

I appeal to your humanity, which is to say, to your appreciation of literature. For I fear the wasps' next port of call will be Jack's heart.

I am writing to you from the lobby of the Waldorf Hotel, a cobble's lob from my lodgings on Bleecker Street. I know not which century I am in, but no matter. Time may be given the slip where the imagination is concerned, I hope you'll agree. I've looked for signs of having lived a previous existence here. I know only that I was a poet; I have to conclude I never came to New York.

I remain, Sir, your most humble and obedient servant,
Francisco Scardanetti



¹ 'This letter fell out of a foxed copy of an 1813 travelogue by Johanna Schopenhauer (the best-selling author and mother of the Great Pessimist) I found in an antiquarian bookshop in Leipzig at the end of the Cold War. I kept the letter but couldn't afford the book (which incidentally gives an atmospheric portrait of Nottingham in the early 1800s and is reserved in its praise of Derby...). The letter's provenance is unknown & there was no envelope,' said Rolf Venner, when we asked him.

² Rolf Venner has worked as a translator, bookseller, conference administrator, and lecturer (French Language, Literature, & Film at the University of Kent; German/English Translation & Interpreting at the University of Leipzig). He writes fiction and lives in Derby.