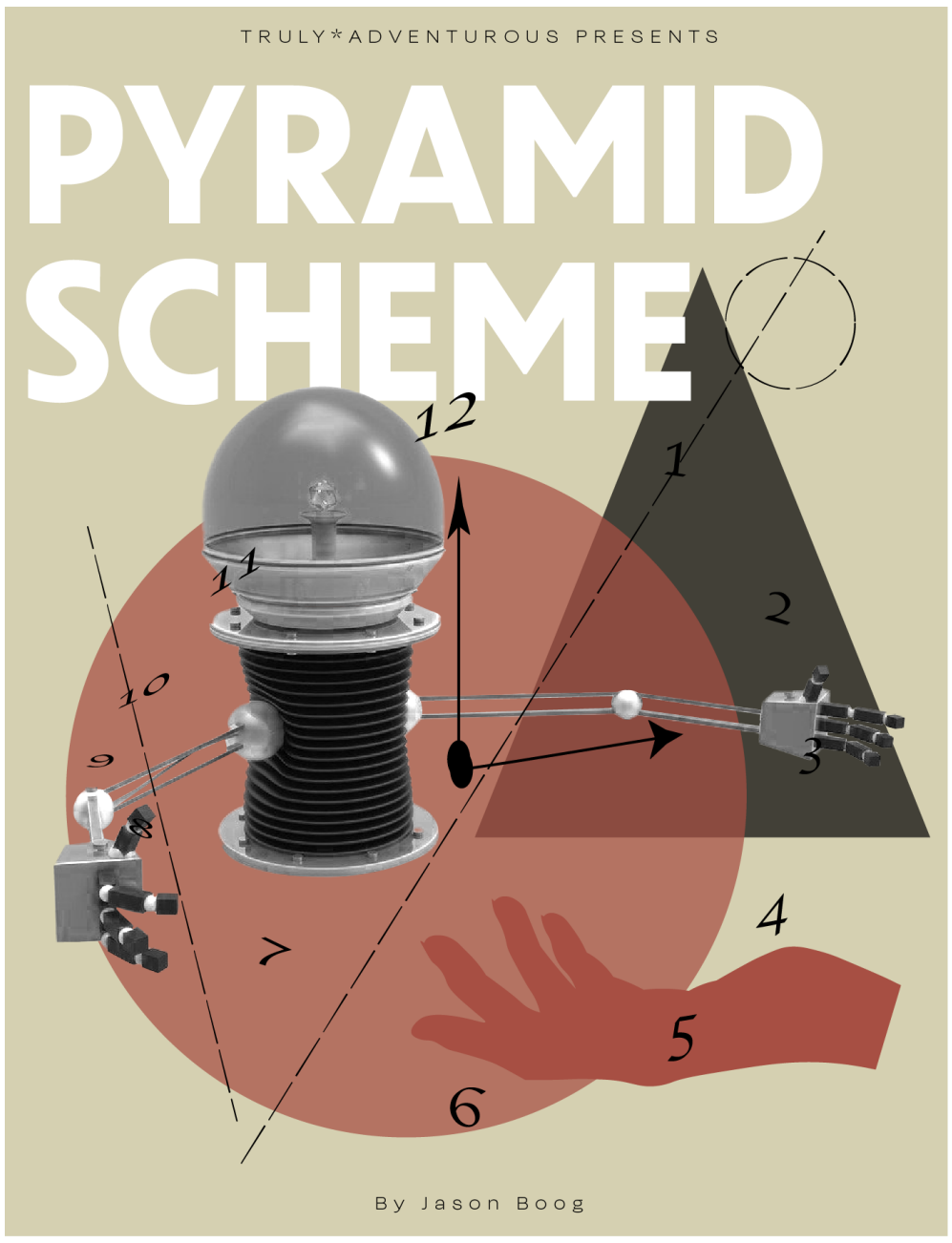



## AN INVESTMENT SCHEME BASED ON A TIME TRAVELER'S INSIDE INFORMATION... OR AN INVESTMENT SCAM AND THE ORIGINAL PYRAMID SCHEME?

One night in the heart of the Great Depression, a professional model named Helen Ressler, 28, knocked on a door in The Ansonia, a posh but infamous residential hotel on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Searching for spiritual guidance during these hard times, Helen's journey had led her to an apartment marked with the nameplate "Alma Nelson."

The hotel was dubbed "the bohemian stepchild of the city." It was the kind of place that thrilled and intimidated those who entered. Since its opening decades earlier, The Ansonia has had a storied reputation. The architect had been institutionalized shortly after he completed the heady mash-up of Greek and Renaissance Beaux-Arts design. The Ansonia hosted badly behaved celebrities, mobsters, bookies and at least one bank robber. A group of Chicago White Sox teammates even conspired to throw the 1919 World Series in one of the luxurious suites.

Having moved to New York from Ohio, Helen now prospered as a hand model, earning a small fortune at a time when most people were struggling. While more than 20 percent of the country was out of work in 1935, Helen's perfectly proportioned fingers graced advertisements in the finest print outlets. Her presence "gave 'it' to many magazine glove advertisements," wrote one reporter. Helen wanted to make a difference beyond convincing people to


Helen Ressler . . a handy type.

Alma Nelson, broad shouldered and self-confident, answered the door. She was known as a gifted mystic, and she held weekly “truth sittings” in her apartment to help her clients contact spirits to find wisdom in navigating the era’s crushing uncertainty. Cautiously, Helen entered the two-bedroom apartment decked out in faux-Chinese style, with paper screens, oriental rugs and imitation Chinese vases. Alma introduced Helen to another guest, a silver-haired engineer named Arthur Lingelbach.

The 86 year-old man had a dapper elegance. He regaled Helen with stories from his amazing career, telling her how he had helped Thomas Edison complete the phonograph and put the finishing touches on the engine in Henry Ford’s Model T. Unlike so many, he did not treat her as unworthy of serious conversation because of her modeling career.

When the small talk ended, Alma dimmed the lights and began a séance, speaking in a high and sharp voice. She weaved back and forth in her chair, claiming to connect with the astral dimension where spirits dwell. Suddenly, Alma’s high-pitched soprano ceased, abruptly replaced by a booming baritone. Her body, according to the observers, had been possessed by a spirit speaking from thousands of years in the past.

“I am Sudah, Son of the Solitude of the Lost Isle of Atlantis!”

The message that followed would change the lives of everyone in the room, sparking a massive investigation by state regulators and a controversy that would mesmerize the country. The two women would be joined together, then torn apart, in a journey that tested the thin line between a fantastical faith and rational economic expectations, chasing dreams of future wonders hidden in plain sight.

Alma Nelson had plenty of experience turning ordinary, secular spaces into transcendent ones. A decade earlier, she had co-founded a congregation as part of the First Spiritualist Church of New York.

Spiritualism as a movement embraced the idea that the spirit lived on after death and that a skilled medium could communicate with those entities. In those days, Alma had worked alongside a charismatic young minister named Arthur Ford. The First Spiritualist Church of New York rented the Chapter Room of Carnegie Hall every Sunday for their gatherings. On some Sunday nights, more than 300 people would pack into the Chapter Room as Ford delivered a “Trance Lecture” to relay messages from spirits. Once Ford finished his trance, other members of First Spiritualist’s congregation, including Alma, took turns on the stage to try to channel spirits.


Alma's tenure at First Spiritualist ended abruptly one hot Sunday night. The service had seemed uneventful. When Ford finished, Alma took the stage, entering a trance of her own. According to Alma, a powerful spirit seemed to travel into her from beneath the sea and the desert sands. "I am Sudah!" the booming voice rattled through Alma's body.

A woman in the congregation interrupted Alma's spiritual breakthrough. According to accounts, she called Alma "uncomplimentary names" and insinuated that the young psychic had an inappropriate relationship with Ford.

Jolted from her trance, Alma stood there on stage, humiliated in front of the congregation that she had helped build. Ford did not defend her, silently empowering the accusations. History does not record Ford's motivations, but he may have sensed that Alma's influence in the congregation had begun to rival his, and that some followers insisted she had greater spiritual powers. Alma fled Carnegie Hall and never returned to the church.

In the aftermath of personal and professional betrayal, the Great Depression pushed Alma into dire straits financially. She scraped together tips as a waitress at a restaurant inside The Ansonia in Manhattan. She lived and worked in the residential hotel crammed with swooping carvings and ornaments, a building designed to evoke 18th Century European palaces. Alma saw power brokers cutting deals every day in this heady atmosphere, but she had been left behind.

Alma tutored clients in mystic philosophy and gave electro-therapeutics treatments in her suite at The Ansonia. She connected with Arthur Lingelbach, an ambitious man who appreciated her heady brew of spiritualism and technology. She was far from her glory days with a fashionable congregation, but the encouragement from the soft spoken Arthur helped boost her confidence.

Mediums depended on their "control," an articulate spirit dwelling in the astral plane who could help them find other spirits with whom they could communicate. During a séance, the control was believed to temporarily take over the psychic's body. These guides were said to hail from every corner of the universe across time and space: American Indian tribes, Persia, France and even Mars. Years later, a New York parapsychologist named Dr. Cornelius Traeger monitored the heartbeats of different mediums possessed by their controls. He documented how the psychic's heartbeat pattern radically shifted at the moment of possession—proof to some that a genuine change overtook their body.

As Helen listened from her seat in the hotel room, Alma's control on this visit identified itself as Sudah. It was the same spirit Alma described entering her body the day her congregation turned against her at Carnegie Hall. Sudah claimed to be from the lost city of Atlantis.

Spiritualists and occultists gravitated toward the story of Atlantis, the mythic

readily imagine an entire civilization being swept away by end times. The spiritualist scholar William J. Colville believed that Atlantis had been a secret gateway to the astral realm. The spirits shared cosmic revelations that changed the Atlantean civilization into a virtual “abode of gods.”

Alma and her believers could help people rediscover those lost wonders of Atlantis. It seemed possible that Sudah could be more than a spiritual messenger, he could be their way out of the Great Depression.

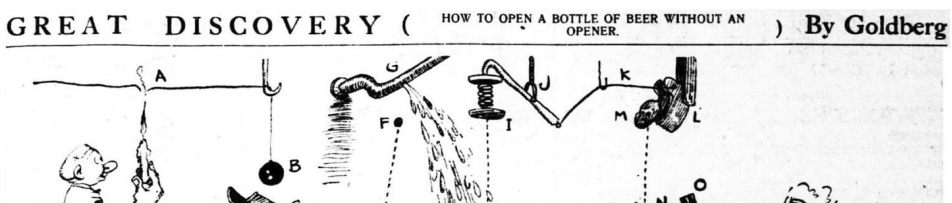
As the séance at The Ansonia unfolded, Sudah ostensibly continued to speak through Alma’s body, sharing stories with Helen about life in Atlantis. The spirit revealed that he had a brother, a wandering soul who had been reincarnated throughout history since the fall of Atlantis. His brother’s spirit had hopscotched across the centuries, working on some of the greatest engineering projects in history.

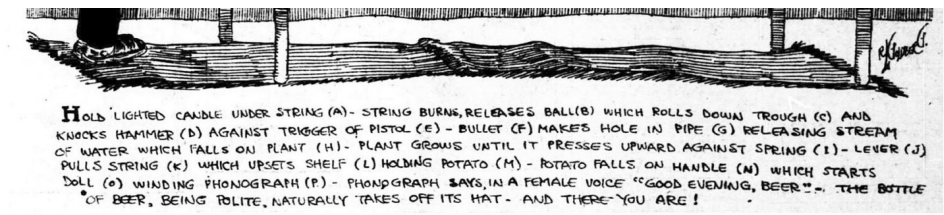
Most dramatically, Sudah’s brother had been an Egyptian nobleman, supervising the construction of the great pyramids. Like Atlantis, the pyramids were perceived by many as holding mystical power unmatched elsewhere in history. The structures’ engineering secrets--still being debated to this day--were seen as a road map to innovations that could unlock humankind’s untapped potential.

After Sudah’s brother died in Egypt, his soul was reborn many times. Now, Sudah had located his sibling’s contemporary incarnation living in New York City. His brother’s soul dwelled in the body of 86-year-old man named Arthur Lingelbach. Helen was dumbfounded. If that was correct, she had been sitting beside not only one of America’s most talented engineers but also Sudah’s brother.

“Trust him,” Sudah said, his voice booming through Alma’s body, reinforcing the significance of the revelation, “and you will gather great wealth.”

After the séance ended, Arthur told Helen more about his engineering expertise. After a stint at General Electric, Arthur said he had designed front-line trenches that saved thousands of American soldiers’ lives during World War I. President Theodore Roosevelt had even tapped the great engineer to work on the construction of the Panama Canal.






Arthur showed her the blueprints for the next generation of inventions he could create if he had sufficient funds for his company, Super Utilities. He had designs for an airplane that could go 2,000 miles per hour and a more super-efficient motor for automobiles. He would make a refrigerator that applied the perpetual motion physics he had learned over his many lifetimes. Without using an ounce of energy, his device would keep food cold. Arthur also had plans for something called a “Super-U-Wave machine,” a therapeutic device that would help people heal by harnessing esoteric energies. Finally, he was on the verge of creating an advanced television set.

After this epic pitch session, Arthur offered Helen the chance to buy Super Utilities shares. In that moment, rational thought may well have overtaken initial excitement, ringing loud alarm bells for Helen. But to the millions of people alienated from traditional organized religions, Spirtualism’s conceits were no more outlandish than burning incense, or believing deceased loved ones watched over them from above, or praying to an unseen deity to help pay mortgages and win athletic championships.

Like many others in the 1930s and perhaps every other era, Helen wanted to believe that there was more to life than suffering. People craved proof that souls could survive beyond this miserable era and head to a brighter future.

Helen and Alma, different in circumstance and personality, had some things in common. Each was dismissed or marginalized in an environment of misogyny; Alma had been pushed out of the Spiritualist church for undermining a man’s dominance while Helen’s value was routinely reduced to a single segment of her body. They both lived in a city crammed full with strangers but where it was easy to feel isolated. They sought higher purposes and to leave impactful legacies, and Alma seemed to be pointing out the path for Helen to achieve that.

Helen invested more than $1,000 (almost $19,000 in today’s value) in Super Utilities. She also gave Alma and Arthur something more valuable: referrals.

Alma and Arthur repeated their same spiritual pitch with a steady stream of clients suggested by Helen. Hundreds of new shareholders invested in Super Utilities. With each contribution from one of Helen’s referrals, the value of the company, and Helen’s shares, ballooned. Arthur incorporated his company with 50,000 shares of common stock at $10 a share, a valuation comparable to $9.4 million today.

Helen asked Alma and Arthur to see the machines they were building with her money. But the proprietors stalled, too busy with other shareholders and growing the new company. When Helen asked to see reports of her dividends, they stonewalled.

Even as new believers came rolling in, Helen began to doubt. Her faith faded quickly in Alma as a prophet and Arthur as a genius. Hearing the same story about pyramids

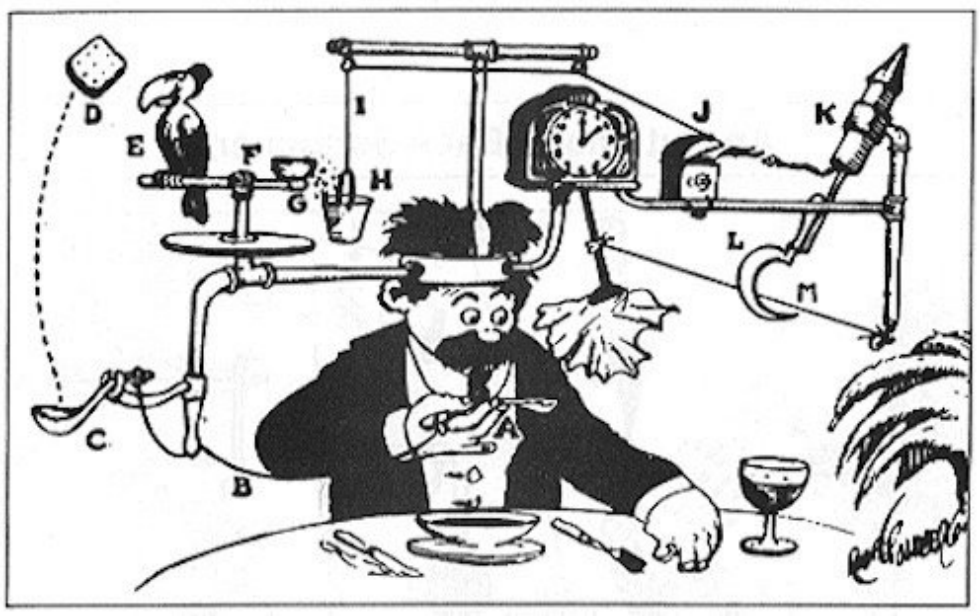
Distraught, Helen decided to visit the attorney general, John J. Bennett, Jr., who touted his successful track records against fraudulent stockbrokers. “Wherever the money is,” he wrote, “in a big city or small town, the smooth talker will smell it out and get millions of it, less the public wakes up and learns how to fight them off.”

*John J. Bennett Jr.*

Bennett, 41 and clean-cut, ushered Helen inside his office. She had worried about being humiliated by her predicament, but the attorney general treated her with respect and sympathy. He told Helen about a wealthy woman who had recently refused to file a complaint against brokers who swindled 1.5 million dollars from her because she worried about bad publicity. “This woman is simply encouraging the fleecing of other innocents, few of whom will be able to sustain the loss as she has done,” he said.

This sentiment helped convince Helen she had a moral duty to act. She signed a complaint, in effect not only renouncing the company but also her friends. The hand model had gone from believer to whistleblower.

The attorney general began preparing a legal case against Super Utilities, and he intended to send Alma and Arthur to prison.




The case became a sensation. “Seance Stock Scheme,” read one New York Times headline, while the Associated Press posed the rhetorical question, “Sells by Sorcery?” Reporters relished the cast of characters assembled in the stock sale: “Glove Model Upset: She Invests in Master and Complains of No Dividends.” As the prosecution’s star witness, Helen brought her ‘it factor’ to the drab sameness of the courtroom on Centre Street in downtown Manhattan.

As she told her story on the witness stand, Helen fought not to be seen as gullible and irresponsible, though it was an uphill battle. It was difficult to describe the spiritual connections she had felt so strongly. “She complained that the Great Sudah of Atlantis persuaded her into buying $1,070 worth of Super Utilities stock but hadn’t told her

in snide language. She was a “mystic waitress” and “electro-therapeutic philosopher.” By enlisting Helen to bring in investors, the allegations suggested a pyramid scheme, in which the value of the company was not based on the proposed products, but rather a continuing flow of investment money in order to inflate the value of previous investments.

Helen was pitted against Alma. Locking eyes in the courtroom would have been a heartbreaking moment for the model, knowing that Alma, who had infused so much hope and wonder into her life, could end up in handcuffs. Throughout the proceedings, Alma sat quietly. Everybody in that courtroom seemed to be betting against her. But they had forgotten one thing: Alma had spent the last ten years cultivating believers. One by one, she also converted every Super Utilities shareholder to her new church. She would not simply surrender.

In a twist nobody would have seen coming, Alma produced the most shocking evidence of the hearing. It was a petition signed by 300 “indignant” Super Utilities stockholders. They were indignant not toward Alma and Arthur but toward the court. The document defended Alma’s gifts as a medium, “expressing absolute faith” in her, and it attacked the fraud charges as “malicious and totally unfounded.” The Super Utilities’ shareholders did not want the psychic and the engineer prosecuted. Not a single shareholder agreed to join Helen in her complaint against Super Utilities. The surprise petition scuttled the criminal side of a case that had been built on harm to the group of investors.

With the prosecutors’ legal ammunition depleted, the most the judge could do was to prohibit Arthur from selling stock in the future, and to ban Alma from advising on money matters at her “truth sittings.” For all intents and purposes, Super Utilities was shuttered, though its principals had escaped prison sentences. The Philadelphia Inquirer led the pack of newspapers mocking Alma: “Mystic Waitress’ Stock Sale Halted,” while the New York Times declared “Spirit Stock Sale Enjoined By Court.”


RARE INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY OR—

Mystery Hangs Around Super Utilities and “Son of Solitude”

NEW YORK, June 20.—(UP)—Mystery hung in the air and dripped from the wainscotting around the headquarters of Super Utilities, Inc., and the Great Suda, Son of Solitude, of the Lost

STIC WAITRESS’ STOCK SALE HALTED

N. Y. Model, Induced to Buy Shares at Seance, Files Complaint Against Electro-Therapeutic Philosopher

NEW YORK, June 17.—Miss Al- a plump, blond young

ments in magazines, Miss Nelson was mentioned along with other persons involved in the sale of

State Halts Stock Sale Of ‘Pyramid-Builder’

Engineer, Hailed as Reincarnation by Ex-Waitress Spiritualist, Is Blocked in ‘Super-Utilities’ Plan—Firm’s Bank Balance Is $3.68

The Attorney General’s office turned thumbs down to- the stock-selling plans of a former waitress turned medium and a self-styled engineer, who was rep- medium to be the reincarnation of an ancient

which Mr. Mi

For skeptics, it was an open and shut case of fraud and manipulation perpetrated against Helen and others who had wanted to believe in something more powerful than themselves and more potent than the economic misery visible all around them.

way to transcend temporal boundaries. During the early days of the Spiritualism movement, H. G. Wells' novel The Time Machine followed the adventures of a time traveling hero who reframes his adventures in terms that a spiritualist would have recognized: "Our mental existences, which are immaterial and have no dimensions, are passing along the Time-Dimension with a uniform velocity from the cradle to the grave." Later in the novel, the time traveler discovers a way to transfer "mental existences" backward and forward along that Time-Dimension.

Alma also claimed to pass messages across the Time-Dimension. Theorists who believed in the scientific possibility of time travel have long pointed to the appearance of technologies and inventions throughout history that seemed anachronistic, inexplicably ahead of their eras, suggesting that such advancements had to be delivered across time. Some of these examples continue to stump the scientific community. Among these peculiar orphans of science, "Greek Fire" was a well-documented ancient Roman weapon that could set fire to water and has never been recreated. The so-called Antikythera mechanism, discovered by divers in a shipwreck, is an intricate set of gears believed to have been a computer capable of executing complex computations about the movements of cosmic bodies, but it incongruously has been dated by experts to 80-100 BCE. More recently, Starlite, a proprietary substance introduced in the 1970s, was so resistant to extreme heat that NASA wanted it, but, since its inventor's death, nobody has been able to reverse engineer it despite advancements in technology.

More recently, many people believed they spotted an anomaly in some grainy footage from 1928, first identified by Irish film aficionado George Clark. The clip in question takes place outside a Los Angeles movie theater hosting a premiere for the Charlie Chaplin movie The Circus. The camera pans along the street scene, capturing a few minutes of B-roll before the movie stars show up.

A woman in a thick coat wanders briefly through the footage, pressing a device to her ear and talking into it. In what may be the only footage from the 1920s to ever go viral in the internet age, those three seconds of film have been watched millions of times online, generating newspaper articles, CNN stories and thousands of pages of commentary speculating about what the woman is holding. To the majority of observers who study the footage, the object looks like the perfect black rectangle of a cell phone. Juxtaposing the viral clip with the sensational Super Utilities case adds another data point: the woman captured in the footage shares Alma's build and general appearance.

In the Manhattan courtroom in 1936, hundreds of investors put their reputations and money on the line to defend the enterprise underway by Alma and Arthur. Among Alma's quiet army of believers, there seemed to be an unwavering affirmation that they were funding something world changing. For them, The Time Machine did not have to remain science fiction any more than Jules Verne's novels of submarines (10,000 Leagues Under the Sea) and rockets to the moon (The First Men in the Moon), both of which seemed wildly unrealistic when published; for the faithful, New York's prosecution resulted in slowing down their miraculous endeavors and pushing them out of the public eye.

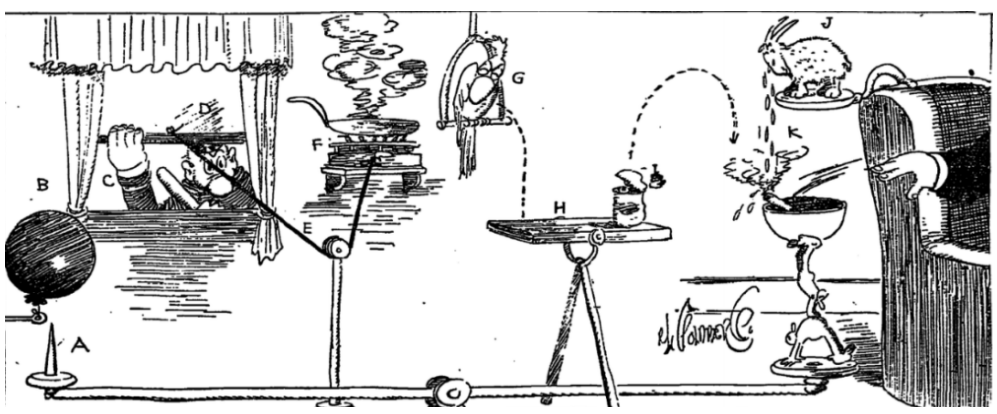
If there was any part of Helen that still wanted to believe Alma had the chance to transform the world, she may have felt a tinge of relief at her former friend's unexpected escape from conviction. Whatever else had transpired,

Despite Helen's financial losses, the courtroom drama ultimately benefited her bank account. The news coverage of the trial emphasized her modeling career, which in turn led to further profiles of her. Her hands were described in detail, once again largely reducing her to a physical fragment. "Their fine patrician symmetry is used to sell creams, lotions and jewelry," one article concluded. "Probably you've never seen her face," another reporter wrote, "but those superb hands you've almost certainly looked at." Success continued to grow, but she no longer had the spiritual solace she had found inside Alma's cramped Astonia hotel room.

Generally, scholars believe the lost city of Atlantis--whose delegate Alma claimed to communicate with--was a legend, but some archeologists, researchers and scientists continue to insist it existed. Using advanced scientific methods, they claim to come closer to pinpointing its location.

The beliefs of spiritualists in the porousness of time echo theories that have come into vogue today, concepts that posit existence occurs in multilayered dimensions. Likewise, scientists at major universities have directed energy into the real possibility of time travel, built on Einstein's Theory of Relativity, publishing reams of peer reviewed papers on the subject. Both the late Stephen Hawking and, more recently, a group of students at MIT organized gatherings for time travelers--only announced after the fact--with hopes that some might attend (none were reported to show up).

After years of being in the public eye and appearing regularly in the press, no reliable paper trail exists to reveal what happened to Alma Nelson following the twists and turns of the court case. Alma seemed to defy time and place in the ultimate fashion one more time-- she disappeared from history.




If Alma and Arthur continued to pursue inventions, they did so out of the public eye; if they were hardened con artists who had managed to slither from the consequences of the law, their disappearance from the public record may be a result of having changed identities.

But a mystery persists, one that tugged at Attorney General Bennett. No evidence survives to suggest that any of the hundreds of other original investors in Super Utilities ever stepped forward with complaints about where their money went, before, during or after the trial. For years, the attorney general puzzled over why these investors stood up for the mystics, without ever finding a satisfactory explanation. Over time, of course, nearly all of Super Utilities' proposed inventions--the supersonic airplanes, the advanced cooling system, the state-of-the-art televisions--came into existence.

As for the 1928 footage, the woman holding the device to her ear seems to suddenly notice she is being caught on film, responding with a wry laugh as she looks, just for a moment, right into the camera.

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