

CHAPTER XXII

THE words came like a stunning blow where a verbal counter-argument was expected. Luckstone and his clients sat like beings who felt the ground slipping from under them, yet were helpless in the paralyzing fear that had seized them. The coroner's eyes traveled from Britz to Manning and Greig, as if seeking confirmation of the detective's statement. But he found only amazement written in their features.

Coroner Hart was the first to recover from the surprise occasioned by Britz's revelation. He became aware of a growing skepticism that refused to accept so obvious an explanation of the puzzling circumstances surrounding the merchant's death. Surely the same solution would have suggested itself to him ere this were it possible for twenty hours to have elapsed between the time of the shooting and the discovery that Whitmore was dead!

"If Whitmore was shot the night before, then he must have deliberately chosen his office