

XLIV.

PANEL-THIEVING.

AS A SYSTEM. — THE PANEL-HOUSE. — ROBBERY.

AS A SYSTEM.

THIS system of robbery, so common in New York, blends prostitution and robbery. It is made profitable, and is not easy of detection. Parties need but little furniture or capital. They seldom stay long in a place. Their safety demands frequent removals. One or two cribs — as these places are called — are quite notorious, and have been kept in the same spot for a number of years. Panel-thieving is reduced to a system, and on the observance of the system the success depends. The women who are employed in this department of crime are mostly intelligent, neat, and good-looking negro or mulatto women. Men who have been robbed do not usually care to have it known that they have been keeping company with a colored woman, especially if they happen to be well-to-do men of family in some rural town. So they will not be likely to press the matter with the police. They will bluster and make a noise. But when their name, residence, and business are taken down, and they find that all their

night frolic is to come out in the public print, they let the prosecution go. Panel-thieves count on this.

THE PANEL-HOUSE.

The place selected is usually a basement in a quiet neighborhood, the more respectable the better. Often panel-thieves hire a basement. The party who rents it, or who lives in the house, does not know who his neighbor is. But usually it is for purposes we will name by and by. All concerned are interested in the game. The room is papered and a panel cut in the paper, or one of the panels is fitted to slide softly. The room contains a bed, a single chair, and a few articles for chamber use, — the whole not worth over fifty dollars. The bolts, and bars, and locks are peculiar, and so made as to seem to lock on the inside, though they do not. They really fasten on the outside. And while the visitor imagines he has locked all comers out, he is really locked in himself, and cannot escape till he has been robbed. A rural gentleman from the country leaves his hotel about ten o'clock at night to see the sights. He meets a neatly-dressed and fine-looking woman, with whom he has a talk. She has a sad story to tell of domestic cruelty. She has been driven to the street, and never accosted a gentleman before, and would not now, did not want drive her to it. The country gentleman is captivated. His sympathies are touched. She incidentally names a modest sum for her company. He proposes a walk to look at her house. On the way the woman details some of her personal history, and in return finds out where her companion is from, and whether he has money worth the trouble

of taking him home to pluck. She keeps up the rôle of an abused woman on her first street walk, and the man becomes quite social. The house is reached, is quite respectable, and in a decent neighborhood; so the parties enter. A plainly furnished basement is seen, but all is neat, cosy, and tidy. As the woman takes off her bonnet and shawl, she is seen to be dressed plainly, but with good taste. The door is carefully bolted, or supposed to be. The price agreed on is paid in advance, partly to see how full the wallet is stuffed, partly that the man may have no occasion to take out his wallet till he gets to his hotel, or at least gets out of the house, for he might find out that he had been robbed, and so make trouble. He must put his clothes on the chair, for there is no other spot except the floor to lay them. The chair is put quite a distance from the bed, so that the robbery can be safely committed.

ROBBERY.

At a given signal the panel slides, and the confederate creeps in on his hands and knees, and searches the pants. All the money is not taken; for this reason none of the parties are brought before the courts; the fact will appear that the man had some money left — a thing not credible if robbed in a panel-house, and he will find it difficult to convince the judge that he did not spend the missing money when he was drunk. Another reason for leaving some money is, that the bulk in the pocket-book must not be so reduced as to excite suspicion. When quite a bulk is removed, carefully prepared packages, about the size, are put in the place of the money. When the robbery has been com-

pleted, and the thief has crept out of the room and closed the panel, a loud knocking is heard at the door. The woman starts up in fright, and announces the arrival of her husband. The man hastily dresses, and makes his escape from the front basement door. In his flight he finds, by feeling, that his pocket-book is all right. He reaches his hotel, and usually not till morning does he know that he has been robbed. His first step is to seek the residence of the panel-thief and demand his money. But how can he find it? The woman, to escape detection, led the man through by-lanes and dark alleys. And should he find the house, he could not identify it. If he could, he would not find the woman or her confederate. If the house was a large one, all the furniture in the room will be changed. It will probably be the abode of a physician, who, indignant at the attempt to convict him of panel-thieving, and to ruin his practice, will threaten to shut the libeller up in the Tombs. As a last resort, the victim will go to the police; but as the woman is at Brooklyn, Harlem, Jersey City, or some new abode far from the robbery, nothing can be done, and the man must bear the loss. And so the panel game goes on from year to year.