

The Whiteest Thing in the World

By MIRIAM MICHELSON (Author of 'The Bishop's Carriage', etc.)

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Theresa Pettit, ambitious and unscrupulous, seeks a position as a writer on a newspaper and is rebuffed by the editor, who gives her an impossible assignment, which she fails to complete. Not realising that she has failed, she believes she is regularly on the staff, and in a burst of honest frenzy she writes an article on the murder trial of Eustace Manly, accused of slaying his boy friend, Miss Pettit, known as "Peach blossom," sees the accused murderer in a new light and writes an amazing story which she delivers to the editor. She believes the man innocent and the publication of the story has written causes an immense sensation in the town and in legal circles.

CHAPTER II—(Continued.)

IN the courtroom the next day the girl, with a bit of pale pink paper-like bloom stuck in her hair, was a target for every eye. Drake, too, looked at her as she sat beside him with a mingling of disgust and astonishment. Yet she appeared as unconscious of her regard as that of the court room habitués, who whispered of the phrase that its unpeppery things, that men learn whose daily life is passed among abnormalities. Evidently her mind, a blank, waxen plate, was capable of retaining but one image, that of a slight, stooped youth with deep set, inscrutable eyes, thick lips forming a beardless, enervating, sensual mouth.

The head bent, though, as Drake followed the girl's eyes—bent unmistakably and gracefully in her direction, as a prince (though a prince of criminals) might show toward one whose loyalty has been proved. It was an acknowledgment, insanely egotistic, but as confident of conferring distinction as though a coronet were set on that long, oddly shaped head where the light brown hair grew fine and straight.

And, like Jacobite whom the royal martyr's condescension doubly thrilled, with reverent pity as well as loyalty, the girl received the salutation. The red ribbon of humility and pride flamed in her cheeks and the jewels of her eyes shone dazzling as a decoration.

Drake looked down upon her. He had a sensation akin to that which he had more than once felt when he had seen her continue to sit beside her than he could bear to be placed at Manly's very elbow. He gathered his papers, rose and changed his seat. And although his impulsive action was remarked by half of those present she did not notice it.

When the reporters fled back into the court room after the noon intermission, past the table where the prisoner sat, every one of them saw a wilted spray of peach blossoms in his hand.

III.

"Miss Peachblossoms, sir," announced the office boy.

Bowman sprang to his feet. He reached out his hand to the girl and handed her to the chair he hurriedly placed. Upon his fallow, strong face a smile, as rare as it was triumphant, played.

"You've seen him, then—you've had an interview with Manly?" he questioned eagerly.

"Yes, sir." She was as unmoved by his cordiality as she had been obvious to the brutality of his first reception of her. "He said he wanted to thank me for my letter to the News."

"Great!" The city editor rubbed his hands together. Satisfaction shone in his sardonic eyes and he looked upon her with that almost endless brooding which marked the apogee of News reporters' careers. "And Drake insisted he was clever; too clever to be bamboozled! If the heat of my interview, then—you've had an interview with Manly?" he questioned eagerly.

"The girl returned his gaze, a faint line of perplexity appearing between her large, wondering eyes.

"But he is clever," she said in her deliberate, young tones. "He is very clever—the cleverest young man in the world, I think."

Bowman's quick frown of disapproval passed quickly in the sunshine of his satisfaction.

"But not as clever as a clever young woman—eh? Is that what you mean?" he chuckled. "Well, you fooled me with that modest daisy way of yours, all right, and I've been in the business twenty years; I don't wonder you took him in. But he ought to be on his guard. I hadn't anything to lose but the chance of picking up a crackjack; he's got his neck to look after."

She had looked uncomprehending, but her face cleared at his last words.

The mother there? What's his opinion of the case? Sure he'll get off, eh? Would you mind speaking louder, I'm a little deaf. Yes, and you asked him what his theory of Drake's death was. And what did he say to that?"

The office boy, whom Bowman turned out bodily when he came to ask if he might show in a local millionaire, was amazed to see the two chatting pleasantly; the girl serious, simple, voluble, childlike; the city editor eager, absorbed, repeating all she had said in a voice that was harsh and tense.

When she left an hour later, the boy, his eyes bulging with curiosity, ran after her with five gold pieces Bowman had sent her.

"But he does not owe her anything," said the girl, putting her hands behind her with that childishness of gesture that suggested fear of physical compulsion.

"He says you're to take it anyway," the boy insisted, hastily pressing the money into her reluctant hands.

He was anxious to get back to the city editor's room, where Bowman, his black eyes glittering with satisfaction, had sandwiches brought in for himself and his stenographer, who, between mouthfuls, read off his notes to a typewriter, which notes Drake, seated at Bowman's own desk, was already re-writing.

The Peachblossom Girl, as she was now called in the court room and in the newspaper accounts of the trial, of which she had become a prominent figure, looked toward Manly the morning the celebrated interview signed with her name appeared in the News, a world of entreaty in her eyes.

She had been weeping her delicate, unfinished face was unconsciously disfigured by tears, and as she bent her appealing gaze upon him involuntarily she clasped her hands in unworded prayer for forgiveness.

Across the heads of those who sat between, Manly returned the gaze. In his deep eyes, in his evasive nostrils, in his curling lips, drawn taut and showing his teeth, a fury of such hatred surged as betrayed how strong a nature he had been.

Manly and Manly gave his attention to the prosecuting attorney's summary, then in progress. But the Peachblossom Girl, at noon she was at the News office. But the office boy knew when Bowman was not to be trifled with.

"I tell you he ain't in," he said, when he found her waiting in tense anxiety in the anteroom.

"He's gone to the city," he said, "but he won't be back. Now, that's flat. No, you can't come in. No, no one else can."

"He's a coward," she cried, with trembling voice; "a cruel coward that would hang an innocent man! Here, give him back his money—he threw the jingling coins upon the table—and tell him I resign my position."

Her position! The office boy was struck dumb. He wanted to laugh, but all he could do was to stand with open mouth while the tears streaming down her cheeks, she flew out of the door and down the stairs.

The reporters, who had become accustomed to varying their accounts of the trial with sensational personation of the Peachblossom Girl, missed her that afternoon. The prosecuting attorney was finishing his address. A somewhat cold and methodical man, he refrained from temperament as well as by design, from the interpretive eloquence, which had characterized his assistant's speech, and which the extraordinary brutality of the crime perhaps justified. But the very temperance of his language made the unspoken thing behind it powerful and effective.

Drake's fastidious sensitive nature he seemed to be handling the theme with tongue and his mental attitude of repugnance, of hardly conquered loathing, of moral nausea—so affected the reporter that he was conscious of a sympathetic contagion. The perspiration beaded his forehead; he gulped nervously, as though his stomach had revolted, while he listened and looked; looked at Manly sitting composed and even attentive, the sneer on his pale lips accentuated perhaps a trifle, his well formed hands clasped, but, lowly, on the table before him, his inscrutable eyes looking straight ahead.

When the arraignment was over and the jury had withdrawn, men looked at one another, at the judge, at any one but Manly. They were as conscious of the presence of Death in that close, still apartment as though the hangman had entered and stood behind them. Shaw, too, the prisoner's attorney, felt the swift touch of disaster. His rudely, coarse, but set, graven with a cheap imitation of confidence, as though a mask he had set upon his features, had melted in the fire of Justice's arraignment, and now betrayed not only the fear behind it, but the pretence that sought to hide that fear. He, not Manly, looked the criminal, save that in the vulgar unscrupulousness of the attorney's face one might read capacity for such a crime as the murder of Drake.

It was while they still sat hushed in the tremor of a crisis that the Peach blossom Girl noisily entered the court room. People made way for her, in the way they did for Manly's mother, as if one who had a sad and guilty right

upon that terrible stage. She did not take her seat among the reporters, but slipped into the place at a table the assistant prosecuting attorney had just vacated; it brought her so close to Manly that she might have touched him. She looked worn and beaten with sorrow and strife, and in her face there was a starved sort of radiance, an intensity of emotional experience that changed living into a transient ecstasy of suffering.

Manly seemed not to have noticed her entrance. At a word from his attorney, who read in the jurors' faces how short a time they needed for deliberation, he had dropped his face into his hands; not in despair, but as one who, borne down by a strain that even so strong a nature must feel physically, is morally unconquered.

When he lifted his head half an hour later, as the jurors fled back into the court room, he saw the girl's neck lying on the table before him. She had slipped at there, where it would meet his eyes the moment he looked up, yet had done so unobtrusively, so stealthily, if there could be stealth in an action so self-conscious, so uncontrollable, that he had not been aware.

"Oh, pity and forgive me," he read mechanically, as the clerk called the roll. "For pity's sake believe that I do not do it, and let me speak to you."

Then the judge's voice broke the stillness. His forthright rigidity shook the court room.

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you arrived at a verdict?"

"We have."

"Do you find the accused guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty."

"There was an instant's pause. Every ear in the court room waited for a magnificent, modifying word. None came.

A frightful scream tore its way through the silence with the mad freedom of hysteria. The mother of Manly had become a struggling, shrieking mass of muscles. All her vanity, all her complacence, was not proof against so terrible a thing as this.

In the confusion that followed the prisoner's attorneys bent over the struggling woman, and for the briefest instant the clerk called the roll. "For pity's sake believe that I do not do it, and let me speak to you."

He looked upon her with the helpless, appealing, bewildered glance of one who is smitten, who does not recognize the face that is nearest to him, but turns toward it in the extreme moment of agony with an unspoken prayer for mere humanity.

With an exquisite, mothering gesture, she drew his tottering figure down beside her, and he fell sobbing upon her breast. Her face was ghastly as it bent over him, but it shone with a radiance that made the reporters as they filed past her look away.

trial was in progress. He had regained his poise. His collapse at the end he attributed to the obligation hysteria and his sympathy for his mother. He smiled and even returned a wink when the Peach blossom Girl and her disappearance were commented upon. He spoke freely of his confidence that Shaw would procure him a new trial, and he would not countenance the most indirect allusion to possibility of another conviction. He was much interested in the newspapers, in which his own youthful, debauched, alert face was spread over the entire page, and he commented upon the varying degrees of skill with which sketches were drawn and articles written, arrogating to himself the critical faculty, as other princely patrons of art and letters have done in unbarred saloons, but with an intelligent appreciation that always sickened Drake, to whom the discovery of any human quality in one so brutal was as revolting as the manifestation of personality might be to a physician who chloroforms the monotony in whose birth he has resisted.

Manly had his favorite in the court that dwelt at the village near the prison, driving in to pay its respects each morning. To those he vouchsafed interesting personal reminiscences and opinions, developing with surprising quickness knowledge of the value of a news item from daily contact with the news specialists who surrounded him and from close study of the ink mirror in which they afterward held him up for the world to gaze upon. He was surprisingly tolerant for a criminal, though capricious as a sovereign should be. Even Drake, whose antipathy Manly had so shrewdly not to persecute and to reciprocate, admitted this. He rather enjoyed being written up as a monster, as something loathly, with mysterious possibilities for better things, which only heightened the normal man's repulsion. He did not object to being

quoted, as a tactful allusion to his dandified airs, his handsome hands of his imperious manner acted for much. There had been no more instance of rigorous censorship in Manly's court; it consisted in the ruthless banishment of a reporter who had dwelt too much upon the weaker side of his personality, and in the close of the trial, and an ignoring of the great criminal the following day.

The first offense might have been pardoned; no man and no man's paper that failed to recognize how great a notoriety was Manly's could hope to be forgiven. That the unhappy aural hand had betrayed the name of Rebecca Manly and graced a payroll. Such evasion of authority was resented by the prince of criminals, who promptly issued a banishment order.

With a similar decree against his disloyal mother.

The exiled news hunter appealed to the chief justice, who was crossing the yard on his way to take Manly back to his cell.

"It's the duke and all, Kerr," he said, "but I'd have thought the beggar would be strong enough to resist all we've offered him to let us come back. Here he is, the biggest criminal in the century, and we're clearing out of it."

"Not him," Kerr stopped a moment at the door of the office. "He's no biggest criminal. He's playing a part, I tell you. Don't I know?"

"You mean—does he weaken when you're alone with him? Tell me," demanded the reporter greedily.

"No, not him. He shows off for me, too. His poor head's turned all right. But he's a weak little beast just the same. He'll die a dirty death—the cur!"

The jailer stepped into the office, leaving the discomfited journalistic per on the outside. Ten minutes later, with Manly's voice handcuffed to his, Kerr was crossing the yard, when something fluttered from the porch of the warden's quarters overhead.

In an instant the jailer's foot was planted upon it, and, constraining his prisoner to stoop with him, he bent and picked up the object. It was only a faded peach blossom he had crushed into the rocky floor of the yard. Involuntarily Manly reached out his hand for it and both men looked at the warden's vine shaded about them.

"The face of a girl in a nurse's cap and apron looked down upon them. It was a thin, haggard face, with great, clear gray eyes; but when Manly's eyes rested upon it a wave of cold sweat over it that made it as delicately appealing as the blossom itself had been before it was crushed by the jailer's foot. And, strangely, that radiant glow was reflected in Kerr's big, tanned, stolid face, as well as in the pallid one of his prisoner."

V.

A firm, large kindness was Michael Kerr's, with not a trace of weakness or hysteria about it. There was an impersonal something in his manner to prisoners, a bare and unapproachable while the fatality gentleness, an unalterable equanimity, as though he held it to be unworkable to show himself made of the same material as the creatures he guarded, toothed, tended and escorted to death. It was this very odd dispassionateness that had been a tower of strength to many a suffering wretch whose nerves, crazed by anticipation, sucked in greedily the calm serenity of Kerr's face while his hand rested upon the immovable steel of the jailer's arm as they walked together toward the gallows.

It had grown upon Kerr unawares—his love for the girl who had come to the prison as nursemaid to the Warden's grandchildren. This man knew human nature in many depths and baseness of the human heart. And as it was the crystal clearness of the girl's soul that had revealed to him his own need, his passion as a need of an antidote for the poisonous spiritual emanations in the midst of which his middle aged, sober life was passing. Unshaken, calm, dutiful days he had been, that never admitted a questioning thought of the orders he received; that had never even weighed the right and wrong of it all; that had divided the world with a simple, clean cut cleavage into those who walked unhandcuffed without and those who wore stripes within. And of these last there was the natural subdivision into those who would wear stripes all their lives and those who should for one day be clean of the taint of the outside and walk to death beside him.

Of the former, the life timers, there was nothing to be asked, Kerr felt. For them there was neither hope nor despair. For them he had limitless patience, a forbearance that might have been angelic but for the unshaken discipline behind it. But of those over whom he should one day be set in the death watch his attitude demanded a conception of the fit, a realization that to "die a dirty death" was worse than living an unclean life, was contemptibly cruel to the tortured, innocent body that was only an irresponsible partner in the crime, yet suffered the penalty of it; and was, moreover, a breach of good faith, an unfair, dishonorable act toward the jailer, whose very existence of untiring forbearance during the hysterical preliminary period was a debt which only a decent, swift, helpful death could discharge.

Kerr had never been ill but twice in his life—once when the rope broke and he had to lift Harrow's squirming body to another death; and again when he had dragged Pugh, the negro, squealing like a doomed, crazed animal, to the scaffold, and the frantic creature broke his bonds and clung to the death watch at the moment the drop was sprung with a death clutch which not even Kerr's two hundred pounds could resist.

For the memory of such as died like this the jailer felt an unending resentment. Of the others who had walked with death upon their shoulders, he thought kindly, even tenderly; as a father might whose troublesome boys have been disciplined and, at the end of their day's disturbance, lie safe asleep at last.

Therefore he despised Manly; and therefore knowing his own prejudice, he unparalledly spared him. "He'll die a dirty death, the cur!" he had said to himself the day Manly was brought in, eliminating at a glance the bulwark of tone, nerve stretched upon the behind which the trapped human animal and his secret tale refuge from the question in men's eyes.

He repeated the estimate to the new nursemaid when she led the conversation that way.

She looked at him without anger—only an unbelated horror in her eyes. "No; he'll die the death of a martyr," she said slowly; "a brave, innocent death, which will make men wonder they could so misjudge him."

Kerr smiled patiently upon her as they walked together in the cool of the evening beyond the prison walls. To him the incapacity of innocence to realize guilt was only another charm in her.

"At any rate, you believe he'll hang," he said. "Do you know, not one of those who go near him dare tell him so? They're all deceiving him."

"Do I believe it? Look at me! Believing it is what makes me look like this. I'll tell him if I only can see him!"

He looked as she bade him, as though the sight were a new one, at the haggard, ghastly face, pale to its fevered lips. It tugged at his heart, that wan, little face.

"But—Kerr stopped to lay a broad hand gently upon her arm—why should you hurt you so, you poor little thing?"

"Why—why, because it does! Because you'll not tell—I'm the one the newspapers called the Peachblossom Girl. The woman who had shamelessly identified herself with such a thing as Manly and this girl—his girl!"

She had walked away from him, as he stood there stunned, and he had to hurry to catch up with her. There was a soft shade of color in her cheek when she heard him again beside her.

"I couldn't help it," she faltered, appealing. "It hurt me so—I had to—to help him. I had to make up if I could—forget what the world was doing to him. And you came here for that?"

She nodded.

"It won't do you any good. You can't see him."

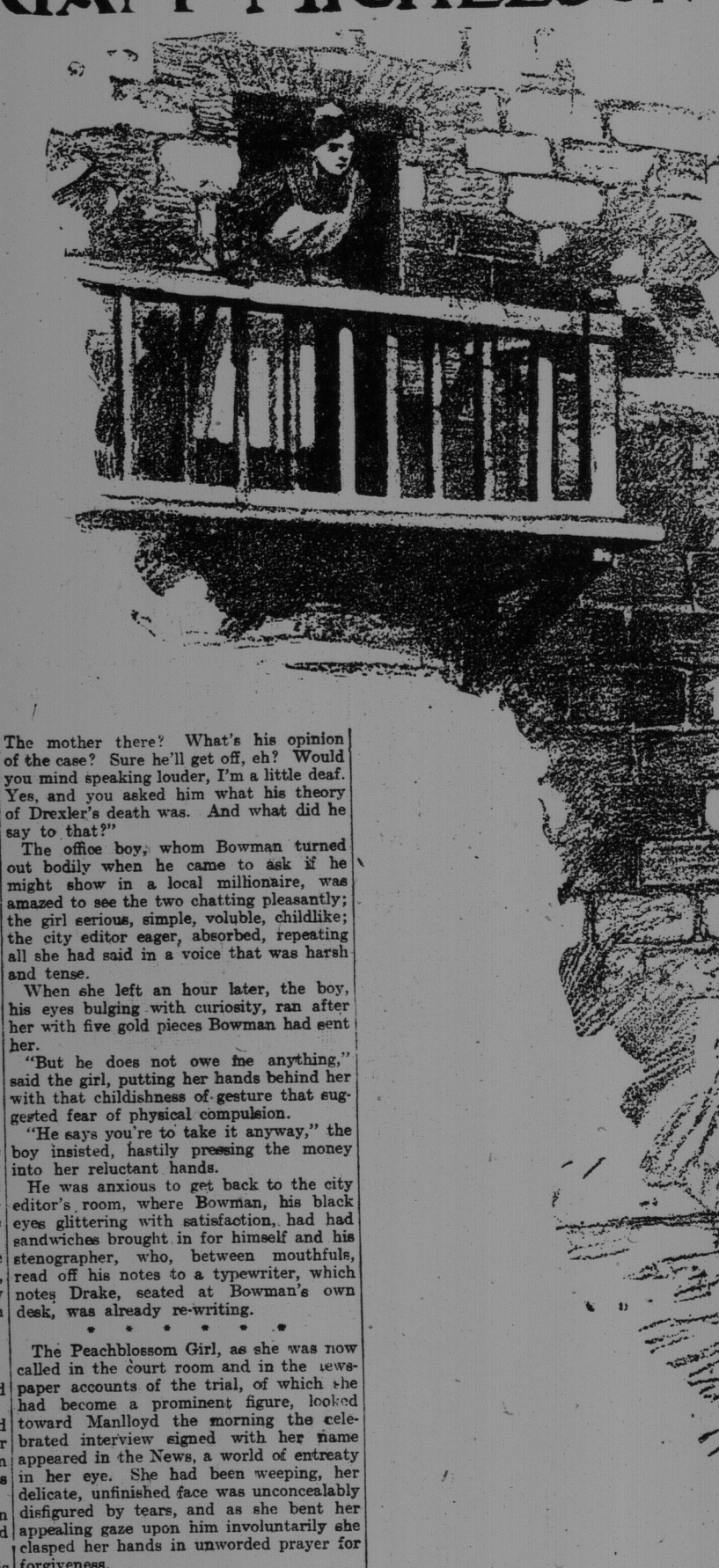
"I thought," her eyes were swimming in tears and her lips trembled. "I thought you were going to—to be good to me."

"Good to you?" Kerr's voice broke. "Good to you and bring you your brother to see that?"

She shivered as though she had been struck.

"Don't—don't!" she cried, lifting imploring hands. "I can't bear for you to say things like that of him."

He walked beside her dazed, still she paused at the gate with appealing, outstretched hand.



Constraining his prisoner to stoop with him, he bent and picked up the object.

"What cure is on you," he cried, holding her a minute, "and on me?"

She only looked at him with childlike, troubled eyes.

"Don't you know?" he asked.

"She shook her head."

"Don't you know that I've been thinking of you every moment these past two months? Don't you know how I want to take you into my home, a home away from here, and nurse you and care for you there? And make you look strong and happy, you poor little thing? Ah! never let you see the sad life or hear a word of its wickedness, my little lamb—my poor little lamb! I wanted you so for my wife—I did!"

The agitation in that quiet, steady voice caught her.

"Oh," she panted, "I am so sorry for you!"

"For me?" His laugh was short and mirthless. "What about you?"

"I—I've got him—yet. I—care for him," she murmured.

(Concluded next week.)

MRS. CLOSE EXPLAINS HOME AT NAUWIGAWAUK

Interesting Particulars Given at Meeting in London and a Larger Scheme is Inaugurated.

In the last issue of the Canadian Gazette reference is made to a meeting at the Manson House, London, in connection with the scheme of Mrs. Eleanor Close, who has established a home for immigrant children at Nauwigawauk (N. B.). A resolution was carried inaugurating and the institution in this province will like-pasture in the crime, yet suffered the penalty of it; and was, moreover, a breach of good faith, an unfair, dishonorable act toward the jailer, whose very existence of untiring forbearance during the hysterical preliminary period was a debt which only a decent, swift, helpful death could discharge.

The Duke of Argyll presided at the meeting and in the course of his remarks said Mrs. Close, by the kind assistance of friends and the public, had been enabled to open a home for children in Nauwigawauk, where the expenses of management were less than in the Old Country. He suggested that similar homes might be tried in Natal, somewhere near Pietermaritzburg.

Mrs. Close proposed a resolution inaugurating the Children's Farm Home Association, to which association she was prepared to hand over the Eleanor Home Farm in New Brunswick, Canada, free from debt, and in view of the fact that there was to be some of the 80,000 children now in workhouses and other institutions, a practical training and open-air life, at a cost which would mean a substantial reduction of the rates here.

Last year she bought an old-fashioned five-acre farm near St. John, now known as the Eleanor Home Farm, and furnished it for a maximum of twenty children and three officials. The total cost amounted to £1,200; in England the average cost would be £5,000. The maintenance of the children worked out at £22 a head per annum; in England the average cost would be £33 9d. a head. The journey of a child from London to the door of the farm cost £12 6d., which was less than a journey to any remote place in England.

Lord Egeston of Tatton said that considerable financial assistance would be necessary to make the larger scheme a success. To get children from the slums into a healthy moral atmosphere would be a task which would benefit both to them and to the Empire. The resolution was carried.

The Governor-General and Lady Grey, in fulfillment of a promise given to Mrs. Close on her last visit to Canada, will visit the home at Nauwigawauk next month when she will be in St. John. The party will make the trip by automobile.

A BIGGER THAN THE DREADNOUGHT LAUNCHED

Britain Sends the Bellerophon Into the Deep at Portsmouth.

Portsmouth, N. H., July 27.—The battleship Bellerophon, another Dreadnought, was launched here this afternoon by Princess Henry of Battenberg.

The new warship has a tonnage of 18,600, which is 700 more than the Dreadnought, and she embodies a number of improvements as a result of the Dreadnought trial.

The Temeraire, the third ship of this class, will be launched the latter part of August.

Westmorland Sunday School Convention.

Salisbury, N. B., July 27.—The annual Sunday school convention of Westmorland county closed in the Methodist church here Friday evening. The attendance at the closing session was greatly curtailed, owing to a heavy downpour of rain.

The session was opened with a half hour of praise, promise and prayer, led by Rev. H. G. Dockrell, of the First Baptist church, Moncton.

A. L. Jones, principal of the public schools, Sackville, then took the chair, and called on Miss Margaret West, who, with a primary class from the Salisbury Sunday schools, taught in a most pleasing manner the lesson for next Sunday.

Of the many excellent addresses delivered during the session, it is doubtful if any were listened to with a keener interest or were of a more practical and helpful character than the closing address delivered by Judge Heston, of Dorchester.

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Whisker Toothpicks.

(New York Press.)

In the Chinatown of every city the grocers sell toothpicks made of walrus whiskers. These are excellent toothpicks, and in China no fashionable dinner is complete without a bundle of them.

From either side of the mouth of the walrus whiskers, at once stiff and pliable, project. They are about four inches long, and the older the walrus the stiffer and more elastic are these hairs.

When the Alaskans kill a walrus they pluck out the whiskers with tweezers, and bundle them up in neat packets, they ship them, when there are enough, to China.