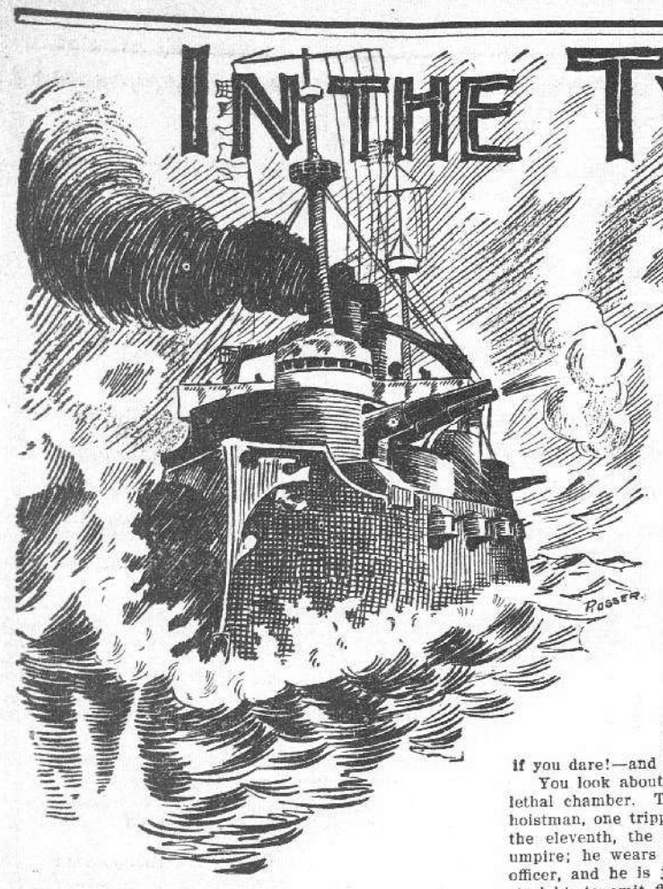
IN THE TWELVE-INCH TURRET

BY RICHARD BARRY



"The Fool Who Looked on Forbidden Things."

FAMILIARITY, 'tis said, breeds contempt; but I have an extreme respect for a 12-inch gun on a battle-ship. The very last thing I care for in that connection is either familiarity or contempt. The men who work it, who some day will fight with it—let those men explain how innocent such a gun is, how facile its management, how bland its temper, how exquisite its adjustment. Not I. Listen to those men a while and you will believe that it is less dangerous to be locked inside the turret while a big gun is being fired than it is to cross Broadway at Twenty-third street. Perhaps it is, but I prefer Broadway.

And yet, the fascination! A great gun has for the imagination the potency of evil itself. Emblem of force, symbol of destruction, it stands serene, majestic, while round its muzzle gather all the forces of the race's struggles, and through its breech march hate, pain, grief, ambition, power and death.

"The torpedo," said the captain of a battle-ship to me one night at a dinner, "is more or less of an experiment, a toy. It would be practically impossible for one to sink a big ship. The only thing I am really afraid of is a 12-inch gun."

The next day I went into the after-turret when the ship was on the range and in full and sympathetic accord with the captain stood beside the breech of one of those guns while it dropped four shots into a target a mile away; stood there with my cap in my hand, ready to clap it over my face in case of accident, cursing the curiosity that led me to that lethal chamber. Then the wonder of it came over me—the silence of the gun-crew; the stealthy leap of the rifle barrel, like the spring of a grasshopper; the quiet, dull report which scarcely trembled that stately moving fortress; the sour-egg smell of the nitrocellulose stimulating the nerves; the sweet, sick subtlety of ether lulling the overwrought brain.

When they shut the steel door that caged us in I slipped into a funk and until the first shot was fired my nerve was gone. The sides of my courage account footed up:

Debit: (1) Imprisonment in an oval case the shape of a coffin, the sides formed of solid steel nine inches thick and the top of steel just as solid and five inches thick; (2) filling a quarter of that case the back third of a 12-inch rifle barrel, ready for action; (3) below, an open chute, with a steel car bringing the shells and powder from the magazines still farther below; (4) the stern, silent faces of the gun-crew, which exactly resemble those faces seen at places of execution; (5 to 100) memory—the knowledge which you cannot fight away that in just such a situation as this the turret-crew of the Georgia went to death, and that no one has ever found out how it happened; that in precisely the same way the Missouri burned to death 29 men, and that not one in that steel cage escaped.

Credit: (1) The face of the umpire. Stop-watch in hand, he stands behind the breech, looking down into the powder-magazines. You know he is there to prevent recklessness. Though these men are firing against time he will let them do nothing foolhardy; if he errs 'twill be on the side of caution. (2) The knowledge that thousands of times guns like this have been fired from turrets like this—and all came out alive. You do not enter railway trains timidly because a dozen people were killed on one a year before five thousand miles away. Yet, when you enter the turret of a 12-inch gun—

They lock you up. There is no escape. You stand there nervously by the trunnion and somehow it is not like a factory or a railway coach or a street car or any other modernly approved limb-mangling device. These things were built to kill and presently these fellows are going to touch an electric spark which will loose enough anxious and determined gas to drive an 850-pound shell 10 miles and put it completely through a steel plate as thick as the one that is supposed to protect you.

Yet, there you are, the Thing before you, and you can reach out and pat it on the shiny, cold haunch. If it wobbles or a spring breaks or a trunnion has mistakenly got itself rusted or the rifle barrel refuses to accommodate the shell, you will be fit brother for a detected cockroach. If there is a flare-back you have the slightest possible chance of escape: hold your cap over your face, don't breathe, hurl yourself under the barrel and fall into the handling-room. You may break a few bones, but if the burning gas gets to no more than 30 per cent. of your skin you will live; that is how the single midshipman who escaped from the Georgia saved himself. Yet no one can tell how that gas gets in its work. Sometimes it burns away the flesh and never touches the clothing; again, it singes off all the hair and never touches the flesh; again, it burns the clothing off clean and leaves you naked, but safe.

So! They have locked you up in this steel cage. The others have some reason here. With them it is work, duty, contest. If killed they die nobly, get brass tablets in the wall with their names inscribed, pensions go to their families, the newspapers call them heroes. If you die they will cut on your obscure tomb:

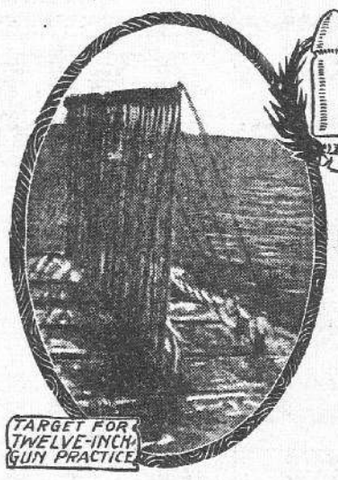
We are on the range. Some one calls, "Starting-buoy," and you know that in another minute this double-twisted, original imitation of billy-blue hell will commence. You reflect that a blast pressure of 12 pounds to the square inch will kill a man. You know that the pressure on the air near the muzzle of this gun whose breech you are beside, when it is fired, is several tons to the square inch. You remember that only a few years ago a green sailorman stood off-side 16 feet, that some one called to him to lie down just as the gun was fired, that he was in the act of lying down when it was fired, but that the suction of the air going with the shell drew his head from his body and broke his neck. This does not add to the pleasure of your situation, for you can easily reach out there—if you dare!—and pat that cold haunch.

You look about and observe your companions in the lethal chamber. They are eleven: two trainers, two pointers, one hoistman, one tripper, two loaders, a rammer and a plugman. And the eleventh, the unnecessary one, the other outsider—he is the umpire; he wears the single stripe of the ensign, a commissioned officer, and he is just about as keen as you are to keep things straight, to omit flare-backs, side-step the bursting of powder-bags and lasso over-speed. You pin your faith there; let this umpire be the sky-pilot of the turret!

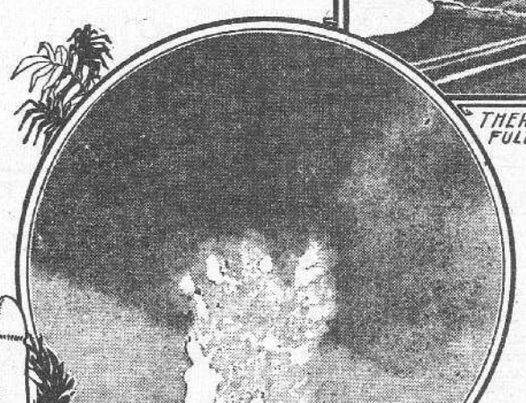
The tripper is a slight lad, a boy of perhaps 18 years. Neither has he ever seen a big gun fired and yet he is to stand there and pull the lever that thrusts the shell and its following powder-bags into the carrying-case before the breech. In an undershirt, a pair of trousers and a thin smile he waits the word. He was caught only a year ago on the streets of Minneapolis, whither he had come fresh from the farm.

Far up on the left of the barrel, encased in a leather head-dress, is the turret-trainer, his right eye locked to the telescope that projects from the hood above him. He might be a diver, with that curious jumble of intricate wires and the green speaking-tube trailing aft. He grasps a big wheel, as a chauffeur his steering-gear, and moves easily on its barbette the 130-ton turret. Below him, between his legs, his assistant sets his sights. They might be riding pickaback, these two, up there along the slope of that sleek steel haunch.

On the other side the pointer, with his assistant, also rides pickaback. Here is the eye for which this whole ship was built: here the nerve and quickness for which the 16,000 tons, the seven millions of dollars, the five years of making, have spread their august being. His accuracy may sink a warship; his weakness ruin a nation. To find him and his like half a million dollars has been spent in a single month. In three minutes now he can qualify and have $10 a month added to his pay for a year. For we have penetrated to the very viscera of war's nature. Here is the man behind the gun. He does the trick. His eye searches the telescopic sight, his left hand turns the wheel that raises and depresses the muzzle of his gun.



TARGET FOR TWELVE-INCH GUN PRACTICE



EXPLOSION OF A TWELVE-INCH SHELL

The whistle! Time begins. The umpire snaps his stop-watch and grasps firmly in his hand the little red book which defines to the farthest nicety the rules that govern this expensive foolery. In the following three minutes this crew will try to put five shots through that flimsy canvas target a mile across the quiet water. And the mill-pond is worthy of its name—the bay of the Magdalene—a haven of refuge. The ship glides along like steel through flesh.

"Silence!" The gun-captain, one of the loaders, speaks!

What a word it is—"silence!" It precedes and closes every vital action in the navy. In it lies such potency of command, such suggestions of obedience, as is needed in the anteroom of death. Once a recruit saw fit to chaff his mate after that command "Silence!" had been given. The gun-captain stepped to him, without anger, and struck him a heavy blow across the face, with a gnarled, wet hand; the recruit carried the welt for a week; by no one was a word said.

Now, until you hear again that command "Silence!" you will hear only two words:

"Commence firing!"

Rumbling from below. With a grating crash the automatic shutter drops in the ammunition-hoist and the shell-car climbs its grinding, steady way to the top. Suddenly you realize that the machine is working of its own accord. You saw no movement on the part of anyone to set it going. Except for that umpire, who, like the man that the fool-killer will doubtless some time get, has really no business there, the turret contains but one officer, a midshipman, and he is with the other gun; all here are enlisted men. The officers are aloft spotting the shells as they strike, or below setting the ranges, with intricate instruments and delicate adjustments. About the gun itself the men and the machinery move automatically, drilled to a precision. Their last instructions were "to take it easy;" consequently they work like buttons in a shirt.

The plugman pulls open the breech; the hoistman locks the car; the loader completes the passage from car to open breech with a ring of pounded brass; the boy tripper jerks down his lever, and the huge shell, nearly half a ton in weight, drops to its all but final resting-place. The rammer holds down on his long release, as a cable gripman throws back his lever, and the smooth brass head forces the shell up till its soft copper rim "takes" on the rifling of the gun. (When a shell is not properly "placed," in this way—if its collar does not "take"—it will surely be a miss. And if the powder-bags are placed wrong end to there is grave danger of a hang-fire, and a hang-fire is worse than a miss-fire—almost as bad as a flareback—and a flareback, as everyone knows, is what, probably did up the Georgia's turret. One of these shells is about the size of a three-year-old boy, and the powder-bags look very much the same as a hundred-pound sack of flour, cylindrical in shape and studded with lumps where the sticks of nitro protrude.) The tripper pulls the lower lever from his car, the first powder-bag falls; another lever, and the second is in. The brass rammer forces them behind the shell. The plugman gives a huge wrench to the breech, and its mushroom head slides up on the powder-bags. The loader slips a primer in the touch-hole, then folds down a tiny piece of steel that forms the electrical connection.

All is ready. These are the hard moments. You clasp your cap tightly in your hand. You become rattled. Though you are locked in the coffin there might be a heavy breeze blowing, the way your trousers flap against your legs. The car has ground its way back; the shutters have closed; the crew it at attention. The place is as clean and neat and silent as at an inspection.

It is now up to the pointer. He grasps his unwieldy mechanism; he closes and wrestles with the vast and complicated steel. The ship moves on her stately and predetermined way, while the seconds fly, and every second counts against the prize-money this pointer may earn, against the trophy this ship may win. The barn-big bull's-eye dances, fantastic, across his magnified field of vision. He twists the wheel a hair and the muzzle of the gun responds by an inch; he reverses, and up, up she surges slowly, imperceptibly. The ship is waiting on the voice of his index finger, and he grows anxious; his whole being pours itself along the wheel to a resolution of that terrible problem. An hour, a minute, five seconds, a week—how much time he knows not—has passed, and still that flimsy canvas throws forth its sinister challenge to be hit. But the crossing black lines of his telescope must place bull's-eye before he presses the trigger. They must! THEY MUST!

THERE IS SOMETHING UNSPEAKABLY SUBLIME IN THE FULL-GROWN CRY OF A GREAT GUN

He pulls—as easily as a child cracks a toy revolv—

Look! the gun is discharged. Yes: it went off just now. I swear it did. Sure enough! The great breech sinks through the floor, the sleek, shiny haunch slips beneath your grasp, welches away there in the glazed light of the lethal chamber, drops till its crest is as low as its belly lay, then recovers, poised, slips to its first position, lies patiently, modestly, for the next charge, as graceful a spring as a tigress ever made on moonlit road, feline with stealthy swiftness, decisive as oiled piston strokes!

And your hand has been 12 inches from the launching of that thunderbolt! Oh, well, this is easy. Who need be afraid here? This is a place for a grand stand; here may gather all lovers of royal sport. Great sport indeed it is, for now we can watch the precision and swiftness of that silent crew working against time.

The plugman unlocks the breech and pulls it open. The loader leaps across the chasm, flips up the tiny guard that breaks the electric connection, and so extracts the used primer. Automatically the air-blast works, and you hear the swift escape, as of steam, as it cleans out the rifle, blowing away gas and stray powder grains. The egg smell of the nitro comes, and the sweetness of the ether.

Then the grind from the hoist, the shutter opens, and up springs again the car. Looking down, you see there the menace that lies in all our ships—the direct location of the gun-breech over the powder magazines. A burnt grain falling down there, with an inefficient shutter the only protection, is a constant danger. Over the building of the ammunition hoist directly above the magazines the navy has fought one of its sternest internal wars and the war is still far from finished; nor will it be over until a sealed tube has been substituted.

The umpire is only too well aware of this danger as he critically watches every move of the crew. The utter silence still prevails. The gun has been once fired and is being loaded for the second time; the first minute has not passed, and still not a word.

The second shot is fired. Again the easy, unbelievable recoil. Less than anywhere in the ship do you feel it here at the trunnion of the gun. 'Tis always so. In storm-centers is the calm; in the core of the acorn dwells the germ. As Disraeli said, the only joy in being prime minister lies in the certainty of your knowledge that nothing is happening on the inside. Here, in the lethal chamber, at the nerve center of destruction, prevail only silence and quiet.

A third and fourth time the smooth recoil. The crew works with the serene delight of a Geneva clock, vastly complicated, but of a single purpose and a single thought. You are locksd up with a single gun. Separated by a skin of steel is its mate. When that speaks the turret is jerked on the barbette and the unfired gun is pulled from its equilibrium. This is the backlash. After every shot the trainer, with a quick twist of his wheel, subtly absorbs the backlash.

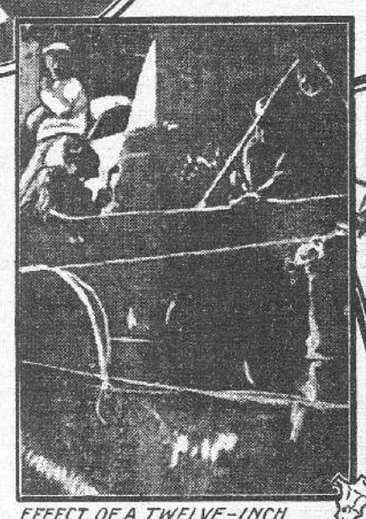
For the fifth time the shutter opens, the grind ascends, the tripper pauses to flip his lever, when—

Silence!" The tone is raised. It has anger, concealed but glowing, like the quick flush of a nervous woman's face. The snap of the "Silence!" cuts like a whip.

As though paralyzed, the action of the turret dies. The loader pauses in the act of inserting the brass connecting-tray, the hand of the tripper falls from its lever, the sight-setter slips from his head-dress, the hoistman crowds up in front of the umpire; the open breech of the gun exudes the thinnest cirrus froth, like the first wreath of smoke from a choice Pinar del Rio.

The umpire points sternly below. It is he who has called. The hoistman and the loaders climb down the hoise and pick up some light-brown chunks that look like broken sticks of horehound candy, pierced with air - holes the long way.

"Cease firing!" commands the umpire. "You've broken a powder-bag."



EFFECT OF A TWELVE-INCH SHELL UPON THE ARMOR-PLATE OF A RUSSIAN CRUISER

JUST OUT OF THE TURRET AFTER PRACTICE

Indignant, protesting, the three men quickly pick up the scattered grains, each as big as a man's middle finger. They look carefully all about, then rush back quickly to their stations, eager to continue. They look to the umpire with the expectancy of dogs asking for crumbs. Every second is eating into their record. This rotten powder-bag will cost them a penalty. They may not qualify; they may fall below the second rate. Horrors! The ship may even descend from trophy class.

The umpire is inexorable. "No!" says he. "That's all this run. Climb down there and go into the corners of that shutter; brush out every crack. I take no chance."

Grumbling, the men go about the prevention that the umpire thinks is worthy any ton of post-mortems and boards of inquiry. But the men, with the Anglo-Saxon light of contest in their eyes, remember only the ordnance officer's dictum—better 40 men killed than to lose the trophy.

"He wants to keep our score down," they mutter. "He's from the ——, and we're their only rivals." The gun captain goes out to protest to the turret officer. The well-trained crew resolves itself, with expert suddenness, into a mob of balked Americans clamoring for fair play. An umpire's job is no more popular on a battleship than it is on a baseball diamond.

At last they count the powder-grains—37. "That bag was half in," growls the loader. "I could have rammed 'er home an' no one'd ever known if that —— hadn't been here. Now we get 1.46 per minute, an' we might 'a' had 2.10. Rats!"

OF WIDELY DIFFERING TYPES

Swift and Berkeley Two Great Irishmen Directly Opposite in Character.

Not often do we see two master minds at work in the same country and at the same time, so completely illustrative of two opposing types as were Swift and Berkeley, T. W. Rolleston says in the Fortnightly. Opposing, but not necessarily hostile. Each of them had exactly what the other lacked. Swift's nature was the more intense and passionate; he was a master of satire and invective, a mighty political leader, capable of rousing a nation to the highest pitch of patriotic fervor. Berkeley's character was larger, sweeter, more humane, but he never touched the chords of passion, no cheering crowds ever followed his footsteps as they did those of Swift after his victory over Wood and Walpole. He loved his countrymen more than he hated her oppressors. Swift called up the Irish people to resist foreign tyranny. Berkeley pointed out all that it was within their power to achieve at home, and bade Ireland turn her gaze inward. Ireland represented for Swift a political cause, for Berkeley a problem of human character. Yet Swift, for all his fame and popularity, had a mare limited conception of Irish patriotism than Berkeley. It should not be forgotten that when Swift spoke of the Irish nation and Irish rights what he meant was something very different from what we speak of under those terms to-day. The Irish nation for him was the English Pale — hpe was the champion of the colonist. Catholic and Celtic Ireland hardly existed for him. He complained bitterly of the importation of Englishmen to fill lucrative places in Ireland, but he was a stanch upholder of the test acts, and would have those places strictly confined to Irishmen of English descent and Protestant religion. He thought the abolition of the Irish language would be a "noble work," and prepared a scheme for that end—he would not even have the gentry acquire it in order to converse with their tenantry lest the savor of it should cling to the tongues in speaking English.

Telpherage System a Success.

A telpherage system capable of handling three-ton loads is in use on the wharf of a steamship line at Richmond, Va., for transferring freight from the vessels to the warehouses and cars, and it is said to operate much more economically and with greater facility than the hand-propelled trucks formerly used for the purpose. It consists of a pair of trolleys on an elevated runway, carrying a frame with hoists for raising and lowering the merchandise trucks. The system is electrically operated, and the control is centered in a cab attached to the device, in which the operator is located.

DISCOURAGED WOMEN.

A Word of Hope for Despairing Ones.

Kidney trouble makes weak, weary, worn women. Backache, hip pains, dizziness, headaches, nervousness, languor, urinary troubles make women suffer untold misery. Ailing kidneys are the cause. Cure them. Mrs. S. D. Ellison, N. Broadway, Lamar, Mo., says: "Kidney trouble wore me down till I had to take to bed. I had terrible pains in my body and limbs and the urine was annoying and full of sediment. I got worse and doctors failed to help. I was discouraged. Doan's Kidney Pills brought quick relief and a final cure and now I am in the best of health."

Remember the name—Doan's. Sold by all dealers. 50 cents a box. Foster-Milburn Co., Buffalo, N. Y.

The Exempts.

"Why are all women so anxious to get rid of freckles?"

"Some of them aren't; but these don't have freckles."

For Colds and Gripp—Capudine.

The best remedy for Gripp and Colds is Hicks' Capudine. Relieves the aching and feverishness. Cures the cold—Headaches also. It's Liquid—Effects immediately—10, 25 and 50c at Drug Stores.

Fitted for the Job.

The general consulted the topographical chart. "You understand, colonel," he said, "that this charge on the enemy's fortification necessitaties the most reckless disregard for human life?" "I understand, general," the colonel replied. "The forlorn hope that leads the movement will be composed exclusively of amateur chauffeurs."

Your Salary.

The universe pays every man in his own coin; if you smile, it smiles upon you in return; if you frown, you will be frowned at; if you sing, you will be invited into gay company; if you think, you will be entertained by thinkers; and if you love the world and earnestly seek for the good that is therein, you will be surrounded by loving friends, and nature will pour into your lap the treasures of the earth. Censure, critise and hate, and you will be censured, criticised and hated by your fellow men.—N. W Zimmerman.

A Realist.

"I am a great believer in realism," remarked the poet.

"Yes?" we queried with a rising inflection, thereby giving him the desired opening.

"I sometimes carry my ideas of realism to a ridiculous extreme," continued the poet.

"Indeed!' we exclaimed inanely, somewhat impatient to reach the point of his witticism.

"Yes," continued the poet, "the other day I wrote a sonnet to the gas company and purposely made the meter defective."

At this point we fainted.

The Artless Boy.

The boy bowed politely to the grocer.

"I understand," he said, "that you want a boy, sir. Will you kindly look me over."

"I only pay $3," said the grocer, abruptly.

"I understood," said the boy, "that you paid four."

The grocer nodded.

"I did pay four," he said, "until I saw in the paper the other day that Millionaire Rogers began his business career on $3 a week."

The boy smiled.

"But I don't expect to be a millionaire," he said. "I don't care to be rich—I'd much rather be good."

The grocer was so much pleased with this artless reply that he compromised with the boy for three and a half.

GOT HIM!

Gertrude—The man I marry must be a genius.

Bertie—Thank heaven we have met!

BAD DREAMS
Caused by Coffee.

"I have been a coffee drinker, more of less, ever since I can remember, until a few months ago I became more and more nervous and irritable, and finally I could not sleep at night for I was horribly disturbed by dreams of all sorts and a species of distressing nightmare.

"Finally, after hearing the experience of numbers of friends who had quit coffee and were drinking Postum, and learning of the great benefits they had derived, I concluded coffee must be the cause of my trouble, so I got some Postum and had it made strictly according to directions.

"I was astonished at the flavour and taste. It entirely took the place of coffee, and to my very great satisfaction, I began to sleep peacefully and sweetly. My nerves improved, and I wish I could wean every man, woman and child from the unwholesome drug—ordinary coffee.

"People really do not appreciate or realize what a powerful drug it is and what terrible effect it has on the human system. If they did, hardly a pound of it would be sold. I would never think of going back to coffee again. I would almost as soon think of putting my hand in a fire after I had once been burned.

"A young lady friend of ours had stomach trouble for a long time, and could not get well as long as she used coffee. She finally quit coffee and began the use of Postum and is now perfectly well. Yours for health."

Read "The Road to Wellville," in pkgs. "There's a Reason."

Ever read the above letter? A new one appears from time to time. They are genuine, true, and full of human interest.