



A GERMAN DUG-OUT WHICH WAS BURNING FOR SEVERAL DAYS

## THE TASK OF THE LINESMEN

THE attacking waves had gained their objective. Men from Saskatoon and Montreal and Halifax, charging through the shell-torn, shrinking gloom, had hurled the veterans of the Prussian Guard from their line of shattered trench, and were furiously digging themselves in along a new line one hundred and fifty yards beyond, under terrific fire from Lupart Wood and from the ridges to northward of the Ancre.

On the extreme right of this new line, in the unspeakable slime of a shell-crater, which was occupied also by three sprawling dead Boches and a smashed machine-gun, crouched the Forward Observation Officer and his signaller over their field telephone, heedless of the storm of shell and bullets raging about them as they signalled back to the nearest battery the progress of the battle and directed the fire of the guns.

The wire from the telephone to the battery ran over ground that was murderously exposed. It crossed the newly-captured trench, which the German guns were now obliterating with high explosive under the impression that our victorious troops were occupying it. Thence it traversed the shell-churned mire of what had been No Man's Land for weeks, before the present attack settled the tenure of it. Then from our own old front trench it ran through a labyrinth of shell-craters till it dived into the well-concealed dug-out which housed the headquarters of the battery.

Throughout every foot of this path perilous the wire was in danger of being cut by shell or shrapnel. The F.O.O. being the eye of the guns, the wire was the optic

nerve; and when it was cut the guns were instantly blinded. It was being cut continually; slashed by the shrapnel, or blown up by the high explosive. It had to be guarded, therefore; watched from end to end, and every break repaired with instant precision.

To guard this vital nerve was the duty of the "linesmen," a desperate duty, calling for more unflinching courage, more iron nerve and resolution than was ever demanded of the leader of any forlorn hope. Each linesman had his section of the wire to patrol, following it with his sack of tools and material through crater, shell-hole, mud-pit and shattered trench, and mending it with swift unerring skill whenever it was broken. For these men none of the splendid intoxication of the struggle, to rob the jaws of death, for the moment, of their grim terrors. With the ground rocking beneath them, the gigantic concussions of gun and shell stupefying their ears, their eyes bewildered by the ceaseless alternation of many-coloured flame and sudden dark, each went methodically about his task, a little lonely figure, intent upon his nippers or his copper wire, unperturbed amidst the crash of worlds. When one fell, stricken suddenly into a spineless heap, or simply dissolving in the scarlet blare of a shell-burst, another came out at once, took up the dead man's work where he had dropped it, and calmly carried on.

In such a task the V.C. is merited over and over. But it is seldom indeed actually gained; for the linesman plays his heroic part upon a stage of dreadful solitude and before no spectators but the eyes of the Unseen.