

Stilt-Racing.

BY WILLIAM G. FITZGERALD.



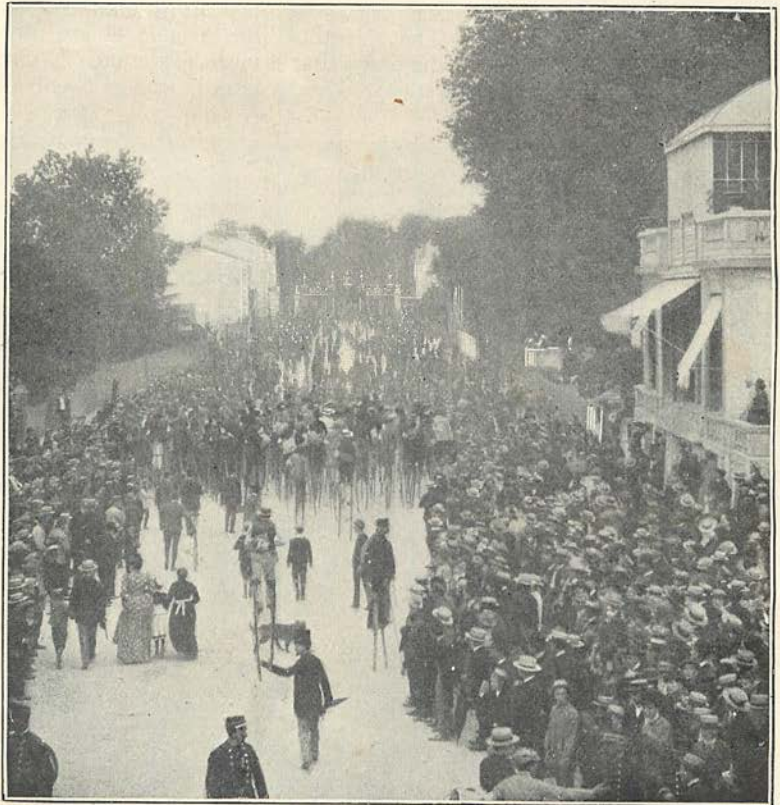
THE casual visitor to Bordeaux and its neighbourhood is apt to remember the district merely as one where the horses wear hats and the donkeys trousers. I can't stop to explain these things, interesting though they are, because I am in a hurry and on stilts. In a way, I went to Bordeaux on stilts, and Her Britannic Majesty's Consul accompanied me into the Landes on the same high mission. 'Tis a topsy-turvy country.

To commence with, the Landes is so-called because it is no good as land, consisting mainly of vast prairies and marshes stretching to the horizon, and covered with heath, furze, reed, bracken, and broom, varied with clumps of sea-pine, acacia, oak, and cork. And the people live on stilts. Don't misunderstand me. They don't eat stilts; they merely pass most of their time upon them. No man (or woman) is above another in the Landes; the stilts being of equal length. The postman on his rounds, the peasant-woman going to market, the shepherd following his flocks, the resin-collector passing from one pine forest to another—all these, aye, and even the smallest children, may be seen mounted on stilts in the villages of this most interesting Department of France. So much for my introduction. Now for the races. They owe their origin to the enterprise of *La Petite Gironde*,

the leading newspaper of the Sud-Ouest, and one of the ablest in all France.

The fact is, every leading journal in the country was, a few years ago, bursting to organize races of some sort. Accordingly the directors of *La Petite Gironde*, wearied with reports of horse, foot, and cycle races, aimed at something higher, something absolutely novel. Suggestions were then invited for the committee's consideration. One reader suggested a race "on the hands," but this was scouted as likely to provoke a riot. An offensive wag suggested a race between Roquefort cheeses, "*avancés*," and then the lists were closed. One day a Landais peasant came into Bordeaux on his stilts, and the idea of stilt races came into being.

The announcements were made two months in advance, to permit of the news



GOING UP TO THE STARTING-POINT.

percolating through the villages of the Landes. Suggestions and questions rained upon the committee—which, by the way, included Sylvain Dornon, the baker-stilter of Arcachon, and the hero of the journey from Paris to Moscow. Intending competitors became rather a bore. Were the stilts to be of a fixed length? Might one get off on the road? Was a man with wooden legs eligible to take part in the stilt race? and so on.

At last everything was settled, and on the appropriate morning of Ascension Day, 1892, the competitors and their friends trooped along the Avenue Carnot towards the starting-point, as is shown in the photo. reproduced on the preceding page. The course for men was from Bordeaux to Bayonne and Biarritz and back to Bordeaux (302 miles); and for women, from Bordeaux to Cérons and back (37 miles). The first prize in the big race was 1,000 francs and a silver-gilt medal; the second, 500 francs and a medal; and the third, 250 francs and a medal. To these must be added any number of class medals and money prizes offered by institutions and clubs, and a vast quantity of miscellaneous goods offered by tradesmen with an eye to advertisement.

The committee decided (1) That the stilts might be as long or as short as the competitor pleased. (2) He might carry a stick, clothes,

provisions, repairing implements, or a change of stilts. (3) He might dismount now and then, but in such cases he must carry his stilts, and must, moreover, be mounted on them when he presented himself at the "control-posts."

There were control-posts (generally cafés or hotels) established at twenty-two villages *en route*, and each of these stations was manned by cyclist volunteers belonging to various great clubs. These gentlemen received the stilts as they passed through, and besides taking signatures and recording times, they acted as special correspondents for *La Petite Gironde*, dispatching descriptive telegrams at frequent intervals. Doctors were in waiting at some of the control-posts, and there were also representatives of "first-aid" societies to attend to stilts with cut or swollen feet.

Owing to the great number of entries, it was finally arranged that each Landais commune should elect its champion and pay his expenses right through. An expense fund was, however, started later on, so that each competitor was at least sure of receiving his railway fare to and from Bordeaux.

In the next photo. we see a party of competitors just arriving at the starting-point in the Avenue Thiers, Bordeaux. The interest taken in the race is manifested by the great crowd, who not only filled the streets but



ARRIVING AT THE STARTING-POINT.

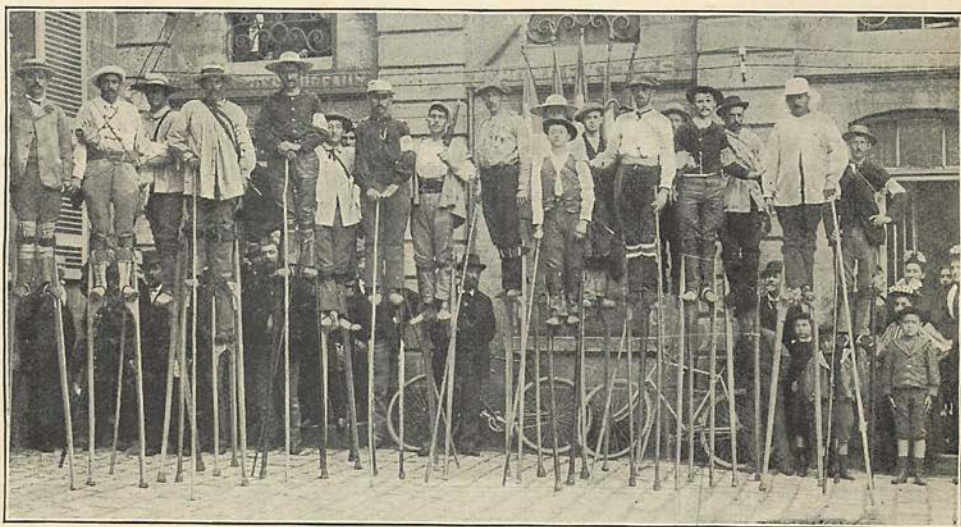
also the balconies and windows of private houses, cafés, and hotels.

I have already hinted that the tradespeople of Bordeaux made a brave show in the matter of gifts. A tailor on the Cours d'Alsace-Lorraine, announcing himself as a lover of all sports, offered *un magnifique costume, fait sur mesure*. Other sartorial artists followed suit—if I may say so—until at length it looked as though the peasants from the Landes would all return home in new clothes.

The Municipality of Bordeaux contributed 100 francs and two medals. One, Pelala, a merchant of Bergerac, offered "twelve bottles of my nourishing Anisette." A man at Barsac would give a glass of Haut Sauterne

Podensac, who offered a prize of 50 francs for the *last* stilter who should arrive at the post before the closing of the race. ("*C'est l'échassier Michone,*" murmured the courteous editor of *La Petite Gironde*, "*qui a profité de cette aubaine inespérée.*")

The accompanying photo. shows a representative group of competitors in real marching order. When on their native heath the long stick becomes a third leg, fitting into the stilter's back and supporting him on a sort of tripod, whilst with his disengaged hands he rapidly knits one of the footless stockings peculiar to the Landes. These fellows have great distances to cover; hence the stilts. The bracken and heather are often wet and the plains swampy; hence,



THE MEN COMPETITORS.

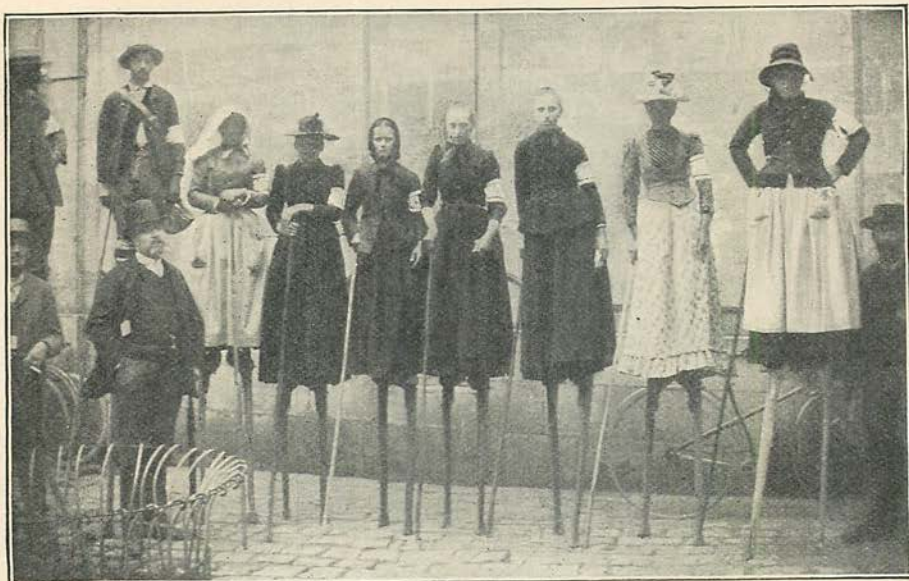
to each stilter, whom he would not detain more than five seconds. Considerate man! A bronze medal was offered to all competitors who, starting off on Thursday, May 26th, when the flag fell, returned to the starting-point, after having accomplished the journey, on Thursday, June 2nd, before 9 p.m., Paris time.

The number of medals offered by various bodies increased at quite an alarming rate. There was one for the *youngest* stilter who accomplished the journey in the specified time; and another for the oldest. There were medals offered by various towns *en route* for the first stilter to arrive there; and there were medals for the champion of the Departments of the Landes and Gironde. Nor must we omit mention of a M. Castéra, representing the firm of Lillet Frères, of

again, the stilts. The sheep are often concealed among the undergrowth; hence—for the third time—the stilts.

Really the preliminaries were almost as interesting as the race itself. The keeper of the Anglo-American bar offered to each competitor "two excellent ham sandwiches." A private enthusiast placed at the disposal of the winner a gorgeously-furnished flat, with the use of bath-room and masseur. Watch-makers, perfumers, boot-makers, hatters, and, in short, tradesmen of all kinds sent along or promised specimens of their wares to the valiant stilters.

There were in all eighty-one entries and sixty-nine starters; thus twelve forfeited the entrance-fee. In the interval between the first announcement and the race, intending competitors had gone into training. The



SOME OF THE STARTERS IN THE LADIES' RACE.

Petite Gironde correspondent, writing from Tartas (Landes), described several test races between as many as fifteen and twenty competitors.

Let me show you a few of the lady stilt-racers. Their course was one of thirty-seven miles only (Bordeaux-Cérons and back), and was intended to be run in the day, so that the women's homes might not suffer through their absence. When they heard of the men's race, they refused to be kept out in the cold. Altogether eighteen women entered.

The rules which governed the men's contest applied equally to the women. They set off about a quarter of an hour after their male colleagues. The first prize in the women's contest, by the way, was 100 francs, the second 60 francs, the third 40 francs, and so on. There were ten consolation prizes of 10 francs each, and as there was no entrance-fee,

things looked very promising for the ladies. Here I may as well point out the winners. The first woman, counting from the left-hand side of the photo., is Marie Pascal, of Lanton, who fairly romped in an easy first. The sixth in the line is Eline Bos, also of Lanton. She came in second. The strong-faced woman, standing third in the line, came from the same town, curiously enough. Her name is Jeanne Prévot, and she was the third to arrive.



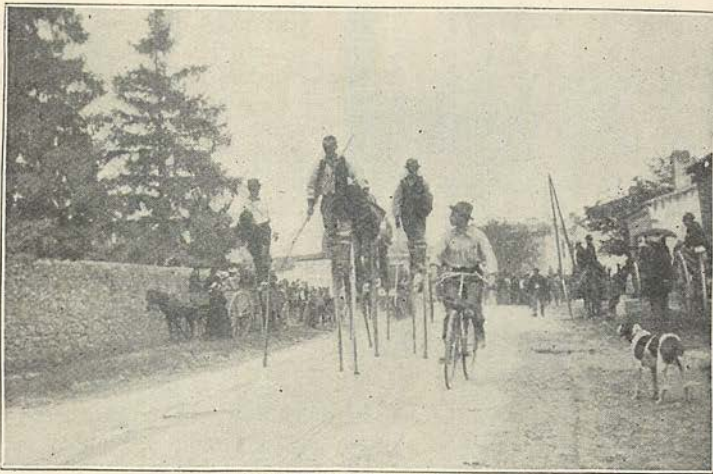
"THEY'RE OFF!"

When at length all competitors were marshalled in line, a pistol was fired, and the queer cavalcade set off leisurely down the beautiful Cours de l'Intendance, or Regent Street of Bordeaux. We see them in the photo. at the bottom of the preceding page. The traders of the Sud-Ouest made special offers to the ladies. There were boxes of biscuits and sweets, cloth stuffs and bonnets; fans, lace fichus, and the like. One man offered—a little unfortunately perhaps—four cases of soap to the first four ladies—possibly a nasty allusion to the winner's condition.

The next photo. to be reproduced shows a typical scene *en route*. It was taken at

Biarritz, Pierre Deycard, of Bilos (the first prize winner), was treated with an eau de Cologne and brandy friction by the head controller, who happened also to be a doctor.

During the progress of the race, there was but one question on the lips of the Bordelais: *Qui gagnera?* It was doubtful all through. The stilter seen most prominently in the last photo. we reproduced is a Landais shepherd named Dominique Roumègoux, of Ychoux. He held the lead for a long time and was terribly anxious to win, his master having promised him, in that event, 100 francs over and above everything else. On arriving at Dax, Roumègoux had a noticeable fixity of ex-



PASSING THROUGH A VILLAGE.

Bouscaut, thirteen kilomètres from Bordeaux. The cyclist is a member of the editorial staff of *La Petite Gironde*. But there were scores of other volunteer cyclist-referees who accompanied the stilters. Sometimes the stilts broke, although they were made of strong ash. The men would then halt for repairs and seize the opportunity of taking a meal—soup and fried eggs, perhaps, with coffee and white wine. The whole race was a triumphal progress for the lucky Landais, who certainly never before had had such a good time. First arrivals at various control-posts were presented with bouquets, laurel wreaths, and more substantial tokens in the shape of free rations and money. Others frankly touted for contributions in the towns, and made a grand thing of it.

Although the men had bits of rubber on the ends of their stilts to deaden concussion, they suffered greatly from a kind of paralysis of the legs, and also sore and chafed feet. Every care was taken of them, however. At

pression, through lack of sleep; whilst his immediate rivals (Dugrand and Peyserre) arrived quite gay, the latter dancing a *pas seul* on his stilts, after signing at the control-post, and exchanging news with great volubility and vivacity. Poor Jean Cailliard, the oldest man who took part in the race, was utterly done up when he arrived at Orthez, 185 kilomètres from the starting-point. He hustled off to bed, poor chap, and went home by the four o'clock train next day, cursing horribly. He told how, when he was, so to speak, on his last legs, the village wags cried, "*Avancez!*" "*Reculiez!*" "*A droite!*" "*A gauche!*" and thought it the funniest thing in the world. If they had only known how little military celerity there was left in Jean Cailliard's aching limbs!

There was a vast deal of excitement in Bordeaux from day to day during the race. The palatial offices of *La Petite Gironde* were besieged day and night by a surging crowd, which eagerly read the telegrams and betted



ELINE BOS AND HER SISTER.

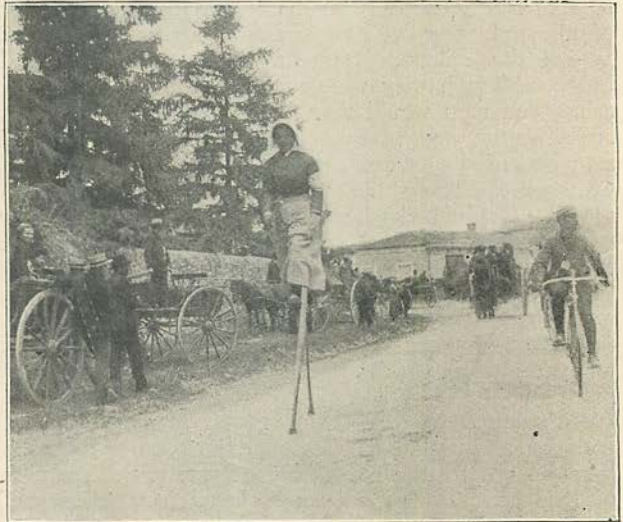
freely according to their fancy. In the office windows were shown a model pair of stilts and a support as used in the Landes by the shepherds and resin-gatherers. This model was made by the veteran *échassier* Sylvain Dornon, acting under instructions from the committee. The staying power of the ladies varied very much. Some fell out, discouraged, after the first few miles. Mlle. Eline Bos, however, was as earnest as she was experienced. She is shown in the accompanying photo. on the left-hand side, and she came in second in the race. This photo. was taken by an amateur, M. René Minier, of Bordeaux, to whom I am very greatly indebted for information and assistance.

The stilt race of 1892 demonstrated the wonderful endurance of the Landais peasants, both male and female. If one takes into consideration the great heat that prevailed, the hardness of the roads, the speed to be maintained if one aspired to win, and

the scanty allowance of food, drink, and sleep, one cannot but marvel at the hardihood of these people. Out of sixty-nine male starters, thirty-two accomplished the enormous journey of 490 kilomètres in the fixed time of eight days and a half. Certainly many suffered great fatigue, and some complained of numbness; but none were seriously ill. One or two had at length to climb down and walk, vanquished by the fierce sun.

It is an interesting fact that at first the men's route was simply Bordeaux, Bayonne, and back; but the authorities at Biarritz begged that the course might be extended to their most beautiful town, particularly as they were just then entertaining His Majesty King Oscar II. of Sweden, and they wanted that monarch to see the stilts. The concession was granted. Another ten miles (16 kilomètres) were added to the course, and a proportionate time-allowance granted to the competitors. By way of a return compliment, the astute authorities of Biarritz contributed 150 francs towards the expenses, and offered the use of the Mairie as a control-post.

The winner of the ladies' race—Marie Pascal, of Lanton—is seen in the next photo. Notice that she is attended by an official pace-maker, or referee, mounted on a bicycle, besides a number of idlers in carts. Mlle. Pascal is passing through the village of Pont de la Maye in long, swinging strides, and already she feels pretty sure of winning not only the first prize, but also the



MARIE PASCAL, WINNER OF THE WOMEN'S RACE.

extra twenty-five francs offered by the municipality of Cérons to the first woman-stiliter who should arrive at the control-post in that town. As a matter of fact, from first to last, the prizes had been steadily growing. "Le Veloce-Sport," "Le Sport du Sud-Ouest et du Midi," and a score of other big clubs came forward with offers of medals, money, and assistance as volunteer scouts and correspondents. Then, again, forfeited entrance-fees went to swell the prize list; and, lastly, there was a vast accumulation of merchandize, ranging from an enormous square of linoleum to a dainty pair of Russian-leather shoes.

The race was beautifully engineered by the promoters. There was a roll-call, or "dress-rehearsal," the day before the race, and there were at least two state processions of the mounted competitors round the boulevards of the city. There were several fine bands in attendance, many of these volunteered, and, of course, huge crowds of pleasure-loving Bordelais, the great event being held on a fête-day.

The next reproduction is from one of M. René Minier's photos. In it are seen, on



JEAN LAFONT AND ANTOINE DUGRAND.

the left, Jean Lafont, of Mias (Gironde), and next to him Antoine Dugrand, of Sore (Landes), respectively second and third in the Bordeaux-Biarritz race. They are plodding along together with amazing persistency. I fear these worthies and their comrades did not make such good time as they might have done, mainly by reason of the lavish hospi-

talities offered them. You must remember that each control-post was a *café* or an hotel, and the proprietors thereof (perhaps with an eye to business) were over-pressing with their wines and *consommations*. Then, again, private persons were equally generous, so that what with drink, the anticipation of winning, and the general uproar and excitement, the bewildered Landais peasants failed to put their best stilt forward through sheer inability to know what they were doing. Which reminds me of an interesting remark made to me by the mayor of La Teste. At Christmas, it seems the Landais folk get elevated in sense not connected with stilts. To speak plainly, they have been seen helplessly drunk, reeling about from one side of the road to the other—*on stilts!* How they manage to keep upright is a miracle.

But to return to Lafont and Dugrand. The former won a silver-gilt medal and 500 francs, and the latter a medal and 250 francs, besides a substantial share of miscellaneous prize money and goods. Roumègoux, the Landais shepherd who strove so earnestly to win, received a consolation prize of a medal and 125 francs. Lafont, at the close of the race, sold his stilts (which he made himself, as they all do) to a shop-keeper on the Cours de l'Intendance. Clearly the unsophisticated peasants "knew something" — to quote an expressive colloquialism. At any rate, Lafont had covered on his 112 kilomètres in sixteen hours. His number was nineteen, and of course — like the rest — he carried a book of rules for his guidance, as well as a map of the course. These maps, by the way, were sold to the public at fifty centimes each. Lafont is twenty-eight years of age. He finished the race on May 30th at 9.38 p.m., his time being 108hr. 16min.

Dugrand, Lafont's companion for the greater part of the way, reached the winning-post at twenty minutes past two in the morning of the 31st (112hr. 50min.). He arrived on his stilts with a firm and rapid step. He was accompanied by a crowd of cyclists and pedestrians, who sang and cheered him alternately. Dr. Tissié, one of the committee,



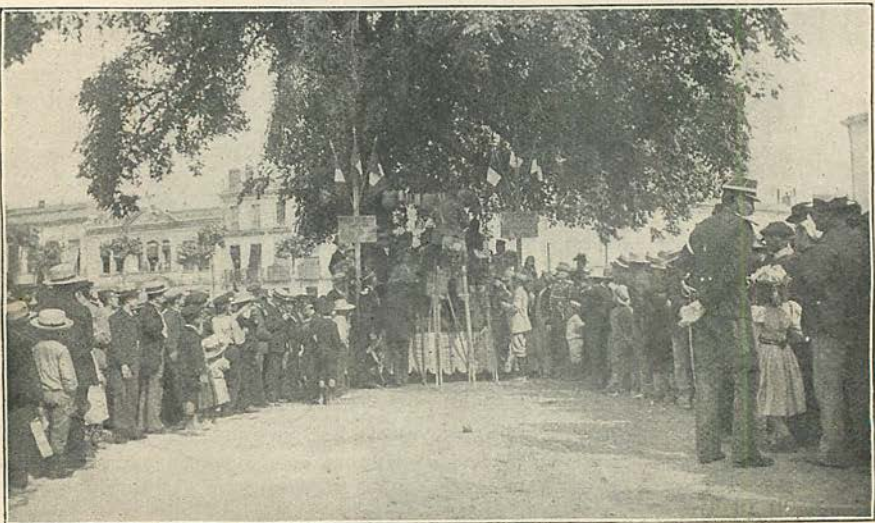
ELINE BOS COMING IN SECOND.

received each stilter, and examined him to ascertain the state of his heart, his pulse, his legs, and general condition. Dugrand had only had eight hours' sleep since he left. After having signed the register and partaken of food, he went off in a *fiacre* with a self-seeking hotel proprietor, whose guest he was to be for some days. The carriage was escorted at a walking pace by a tumultuous crowd.

The next photo. shows Mlle. Eline Bos (in the big hat) and her sister, just after leaving the last control-post on the homeward journey. This is the village of Pont

and brothers—in the great race; and since it cost the stilteresses nothing to live in Bordeaux, they waited there for the male competitors, and even went out many kilometres from the boulevard to meet them.

In the next photo. is shown the arrival of the winner of the great long-distance race at the control-post at Langon. The referees sat under a big tree near the Café de Commerce. A table was spread here with roast and boiled chickens, soups, beefsteaks, and other substantial viands. The control-posts were decorated with announcement placards, flags, and lanterns. Here is a specimen



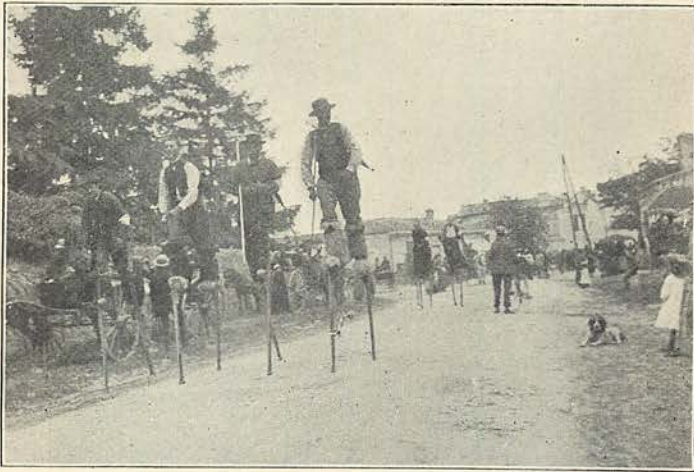
ARRIVAL AT A CONTROL-POST (MEN'S RACE).

de la Maye, seven kilomètres from Bordeaux. Eline Bos, you will remember, came in second in the ladies' race. When the women-stilters had run their race, they remained in the city and had a "real good time" all the week. Their presence (on stilts) fanned the excitement of the populace to fever heat, until the sole topic of conversation was the *course des échassiers*—people could think of nothing else. The women had many relatives—husbands

despatch from one of these stations to the head offices of *La Petite Gironde*, in Bordeaux: "*Villandrant, 28 Mai. Dubet, premier échassier, passé a cinq heures trente cinq minutes. Reparti aussitôt. Légèrement blessé.*"

Dubet, by the way, had had rather a bad fall through the breaking of his left stilt when only a few hundred mètres from Villandrant. He was delayed some time making the necessary repairs. This man is seen in the next photo., which shows four stilts passing through a village very near Bordeaux.

St. Vincent de Terosse he was followed by musicians, who played "*La Marseillaise*" with so great an effect upon the crowd, that one gave him ten francs, another twenty, and so on. At Dax he found 200 people waiting for him. He was too fatigued to notice them, and had to ask his cycling escort to roar at him in order to keep him awake. He even dozed on his stilts, still striding mechanically. Camphorated brandy frictions were tried, to get rid of the cramp that threatened him. Young girls came out to meet him with laurel wreaths and bouquets,



A LAST SPURT FOR HOME.

Dubet is the hatless and coatless man, third from the right. Behind are seen some of the women-folk on stilts, doubtless eagerly discussing the chances of their relatives and fellow-villagers. The stilt-walker (*échassier*) on the extreme right, silhouetted sharply against the sky, is the first prize winner and champion of all, Pierre Deycard, of Bilos, commune of Salles, Department of the Gironde. He won the most valuable of all the many medals, besides a thousand francs, and the lion's share of the minor prize money and gifts in kind. His number was fifty-one and his age thirty-one. He arrived on May 30th, at two minutes to five in the evening, only a few hours ahead of Lafont. His time was 103hrs. 36min., and his average, 4 kilomètres 938 mètres an hour, including stops. His progress was a veritable *tour de force*. He was terribly anxious to win. His short snatches of sleep were broken by dreams, in which he seemed to be buying cows with the prize money and settling down to married life with his sweetheart. At

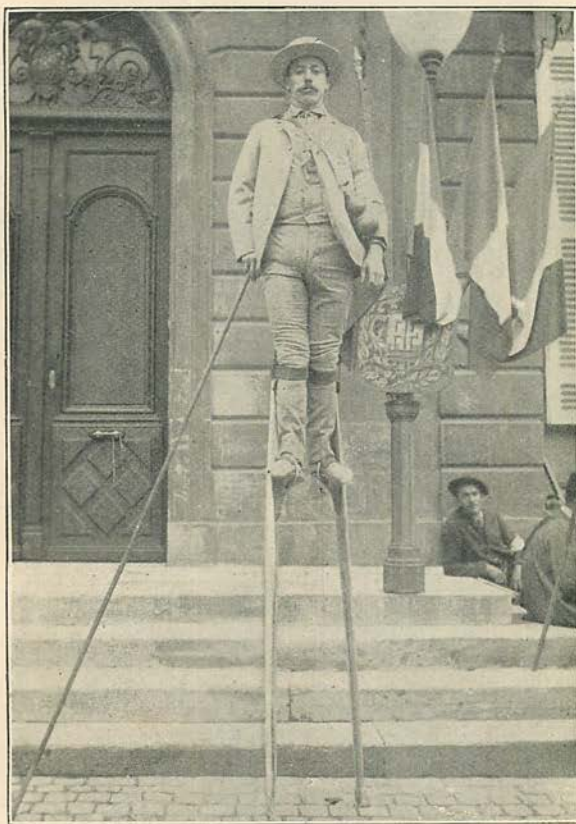
and everywhere he was hailed like a conquering Roman general.

Deycard was at length signalled on the Toulouse road, sixteen kilomètes out of Bordeaux. Sixty cyclists rode forth to meet him, and hundreds of pedestrians also left the city. At last they met the champion. He was walking in the shade with a firm, regular step that bespoke rigid training, method, and experience. He wore a light jacket of flannel, and his head was enveloped in wet handkerchiefs. As he drew near the city the crowd increased to such an extent so that you could have stilted on the people's heads, to say nothing of the carriages. Children were almost crushed to death in the great concourse. After being photographed in the courtyard, he got off his stilts and went into a room set apart for him at the offices of *La Petite Gironde*.

"Pulse 129 beats, heart 120 per minute," said Dr. Tissié. "A little swelling in the right foot. Wiry, muscular man—grand type of the Landais."

Then followed cordials, a sponge bath, and a change of under-clothes. Next his self-appointed host claimed him, and bore him away in a carriage to the hotel, which was illuminated with coloured lamps in the shape of stilts. Deycard then partook of some chicken broth and old Burgundy (what a time!), after which he had $6\frac{3}{4}$ hours' sleep. Here is Pierre Deycard in full marching order. Asked what was his most remarkable experience *en route*, he said it was his being taken to an hotel, treated to a banquet of

select champions from among the stilts who had distinguished themselves in 1892. This race was between three stilt-walkers, three pedestrians, and three horses. The winner was a horse named "Charlatan," who did the 273 miles in 62hrs. 27min. Next to arrive was the stilt-walker, Fauconneau. The third and fourth arrivals were also stilts (Dubet and Desarnaud). Fauconneau arrived only half an hour after "Charlatan." The first pedestrian, Dufour, of Rouen, took 108hrs. Only one horse and two pedestrians finished



PIERRE DEYCARD, CHAMPION AND FIRST.

fifteen courses, with choice wines, and then made to parade the town with a bank-note for 1,000 francs pinned on his chest.

There were other stilt races in subsequent years. In 1893 came one from Bordeaux to Montauban and back, 273 miles. There were 103 starters. The next year brought a complete change of plan. So great was the number of entries and the difficulty of keeping order in the city, that it was resolved to

the race, whereas all three stilts came in well within the time limit.

It only remains for me to thank in the most cordial manner the British Consul in Bordeaux, Mr. Walter R. Hearn, whose invaluable assistance and kind hospitality I greatly appreciated during my stay in the city. Truly, Mr. Hearn's cheery presence, able counsel, and great experience are a priceless blessing to his "stranded" countrymen.