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A Land of Stilts.

(The 'Cottager and Artizan.')

A strange district is that of the Landes, in the south-west of France, though some of its most picturesque features are dying out, as is the case everywhere. In this region a great battle has been waged between the forces of nature and the will of man, in which the latter, though often checked, is winning the day.

Hundreds of years ago, this district of the Landes was a flourishing one. Prosperous towns and villages covered it, and forests of pine trees, stretching probably along the coast of the Bay of Biscay, protected the sandy plains from the sea, while their roots helped to bind the soil together. But whether set on fire during the long wars which raged, or used wastefully as timber by the people, it is certain that the forests disappeared completely, and with their disappearance the face of the country changed entirely.

The sand of which the surface of the soil was composed, and which was constantly being cast up by the sea in vast quantities, no longer held together by the roots of living trees, became the sport of every wind that blew. A sand-hill would suddenly rise out of the plain, and the next storm might lift it to another spot, leagues away, or scatter it broadcast. The sand was drifted just like fine snow in a north-east gale, and as the wind blew from different directions, the land was being constantly changed. Nothing could have been more strange and fantastic; the country for many miles inland became a desert.

One man, however, set himself to see if this once flourishing country could not be reclaimed. This was Brémontier, a civil engineer, who in 1787 wrote a pamphlet showing how the barrier might be restored, and the shifting dunes fixed by sowing pines. The difficulty was to make the young plants take root in such a soil; but by dogged perseverance this was by degrees accomplished, and dune after dune fixed.

Since then the pine forests have not only covered the chains of the dunes which run parallel to the coast, but have spread far inland over immense tracts of level land, where great flocks of sheep were formerly tended by roaming shepherds on stilts.

The same mode of life still continues in places, but it is the exception now to find an open plain where sheep are browsing knee-deep in heather; the Landais shepherd, perched upon his high stilts, watching his flock as he knits, and looking like a fantastic giant against the sky.

The people of the Landes were obliged to take to stilts on account of the condition of the soil, though as this changes the use of stilts is dying out, and will, no doubt, in time quite disappear.

In the first place there is the sand, into which the feet sink up to the ankles. Stilts also sink into it, though they end in round knobs, or have the hoofs of animals fastened to them, to prevent this; but a man so mounted has great power over his legs.

Then the marshes have to be reckoned with. These used to be very extensive, and were the cause of much sickness. It may seem strange



A LANDAIS SHEPHERD.

that such a sandy soil should become marshy, but the explanation is simple. The sand has caked together at some distance below the surface into a kind of stone, through which no water can pass. The rains of winter, being thus unable to drain away, collect in the hollows between the dunes, forming lakes and marshes, the latter being mostly covered with herbage in summer.

Thither the shepherd takes his flock, stepping with his stilts from tuft to tuft of firmly fixed heather, and leading his sheep where the ground is safest and the herbage most abundant. Large tracts of this wild region are completely overgrown with furze, and here the use of stilts comes in again, for one would have to be encased in leather in order to walk through such a prickly wilderness.

Moreover, these long wooden legs, which lift a man four or five feet above the ground, make long distances short to the Landais peasant, for while he is leisurely stepping, another person with only his natural legs to rely upon would have to run in order to keep up with him. Let the stiltman quicken his movement, and the other would soon be left far behind.

The rural postmen—there is a postal service even in the Landes—often go on stilts,

especially in winter, when so much of the flat country is under water. Stepping through the water in this way the Landais, covered with his sheep's or goat's skin, when seen from a distance, looks exceedingly like a giant flamingo. The resemblance would be quite startling if his legs were red.

It is needless to say that the ease with which the Landais travels upon stilts, and dances on them when in a festive mood, can only be gained by long practice. He learnt the art in childhood, almost as soon as he felt quite firm upon the legs that nature had given him. The shepherds, who have used stilts all their lives, would feel like fish out of water if they were to follow their sheep on foot.

When the Landais shepherd or herdsman starts off for the day, or, as it sometimes happens in summer, for two or three days, he carries a wallet containing food, chiefly bread—very dark from the quantity of rye that is in it—and a gourd filled with water. These are slung at his side. A gun is often strapped to his back; or in rainy weather a great blue cotton umbrella, such as most people have seen in the rural parts of England.

When he has mounted his stilts by the side of his hut, and has strapped them to his legs,