

A Potato-Peeling Competition.

BY H. G. HOLMES.



THIS is an age of competition and the survival of the fittest. Individuality is regarded as the *sine qua non* to win success. No matter what the position, from Premier of an Empire right away down to Champion Potato-Peeler of a mighty city, the struggle to reach either lofty pinnacle only varies comparatively.

Such a reflection was almost certain to occur to the spectator of one of the most novel and withal amusing contests ever organized in London.

The well-known catering firm of "Pearce and Plenty" owns the distinction of providing food on a marvellously cheap scale to a certain class of the vast London public. The number of "sausages and mashed" which the score or so of "Pearce and Plenty" establishments are daily called upon by their hungry patrons to serve over the counter is—well, appalling! Other similarly satisfactory dainties are quite beyond counting. But it will be sufficient for the purposes of this article to state that over 2,500 tons of potatoes are cooked and sold by this firm alone in a year.

Each of the many depôts of delectable dishes has its staff of lads, whose sole work throughout the day, from nine o'clock in the morning until seven in the evening, is potato-peeling. They are paid about 8s. a week, with an allowance for each hundredweight of potatoes they may peel in the six days. Pearce's employ about eighty boys to peel their potatoes, of which about fifty tons are

used in a week, while some of the boys can peel 70lb. in an hour.

As an additional inducement to make nimble fingers acquire more speed, once a year there is held a competition, open to the smartest of the potato-peeling brigade. Only those who have seen the boys at work in such a contest can form an adequate idea of their dexterity.

It was on a wintry evening that the writer made the best of his way to "Pearce and Plenty's" depôt in Clerkenwell Road. It was past the hour when customers are served, and although the great hall of "'a'penny mugs and doorsteps" was almost empty, there still hovered around the place an air of activity. Attendants hurried from mysterious cupboards and passages, each laden with a huge bucket of tubers *en route* for the scene of the coming battle. Outside the doors groups of boys, competitors and their mates, waited restlessly for the signal to enter and start business. There was no mistaking the lads who had been chosen to display the activity of their muscles in the gentle art. Each carried his expectant anxiety written plainly on his features—for were not the prizes worth winning? A bright golden sovereign for the champion and five other amounts of less substantial value for runners-up.

"You'll win that quid, ole man!" each knight of the scraper was solemnly assured by his particular chums.

Soon the arena was ready, and, at a word, the boys filed in to their seats. They numbered fourteen, coming from all parts of

London, north, south, east, and as far west as Charing Cross. Not more than two boys were allowed to enter from any branch restaurant.

When they had stripped and got into war-paint they looked a smart, determined lot of youngsters. Before each were two buckets, one packed with 28lb. of potatoes "in their jackets," the other gaping open to receive the tubers peeled and ready for the boilers. A special knife, guarded to prevent wastage in peeling, was gripped in the right hand of each eager competitor. Around them on every side were visitors, come to look on and enjoy the scene. At the backs of some of the young scrapers stood a friend, ready with wise counsel and cheery chaff to encourage his "pal." Outside in the street an excited "gallery," for whom there was no entrance to the show, could be heard yelling cries of inspiration to their more favoured companions.

A hush came over everything as Mr. Pearce, senior, stepped into the space separating the two long rows of competitors, and read the rules. The winning of a prize not only depended on speed, he pointed out, but there were two independent judges present who would afterwards inspect the work done, and award points to those whose potatoes were well peeled throughout, leaving no "black eyes" or other blemishes.

Precisely at eight o'clock Mr. Pearce gave

the word to "go!" Swift as the race-horse at the fall of the flag fourteen pairs of willing hands shot into action. The battle had begun! The invisible gallery outside, in some mysterious way becoming aware that the fun had started, cheered boisterously.

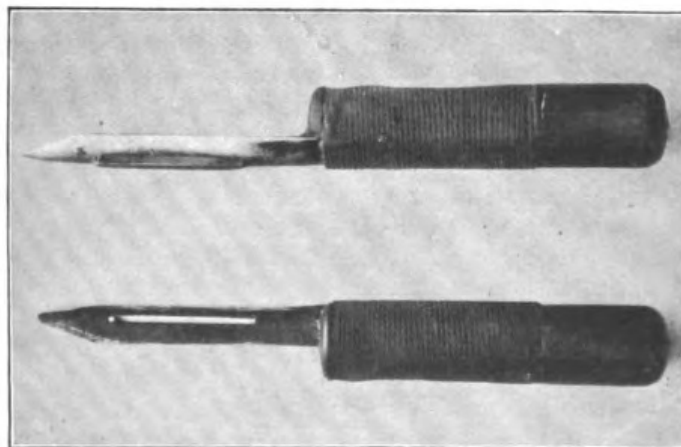
Splash — splash — splash! No sooner had the boys gripped their tubers and set their scrapers flying than it appeared to the spectators that the creamy spheres and oblongs began to drop into the yawning buckets of water that stood before every boy. The chippings of peel flew about in showers. To and fro flashed the knives in the expert hands of the young shavers.

"Splash, splash, splash!" went the peelings into the water, into which they continuously dropped from the hand that gripped another "brownie" almost as soon as the peeled one had left it. Fourteen deft young hands whirled the sharp scrapers, sending forth fourteen showers of peelings. Could they possibly keep up such marvellous dexterity throughout the entire task of a quarter of a hundred-weight of "nobbly ones"? It certainly seemed to be impossible.

It was interesting to notice the styles of some of the various boys. Some people imagine that there is only one way of peeling a potato. There are at least half-a-dozen. A boy who moved his scraper like a needle of a sewing-machine at work, and



EACH OF THESE BUCKETS CONTAINS THE 28LB. OF POTATOES TO BE PEELLED BY EACH COMPETITOR.
From a Photograph.



From a Photograph. KNIVES USED IN THE COMPETITION.



From a]

WAITING FOR THE WORD "GO!"

[Photograph.

who proved to be the fastest peeler in the company, gripped each potato with his left hand and placed it against a bit of board fitted into the top portion of his apron, just below the neck. Holding the potato firmly against the board, he scraped inwards with a

A few taps of the point of the knife, and hey, presto! "eyes" flew about the place like a hailstorm. This youth, whose name is Hazell, and who came from Pearce's Lambeth Hill branch, must prove an excellent example to his fellow-peelers.



From a]

THE CONTEST IN FULL SWING.

[Photograph.

stroke as unerring as a steam-hammer. A large potato, weighing 2lb., passed through his hands in 4 3/5sec. This youngster's dexterity in extracting "eyes" was wonderful.

Another style of peel-removal to be seen was the holding of the potato firmly against the lower part of the bent right knee, scraping inwards. This position gives more leverage

to the arm, but necessitates the bending of the body, the operator being almost doubled up. Such a style must prove ruinous to the physique of a young lad if practised through-

hand and pared outwards as a man whittles a stick.

There was tremendous excitement amongst the competitors, and a yell from the invisible



THE POSITION ADOPTED BY J. GODDARD, THE FIRST PRIZE WINNER. *From a* [Photograph.]



THE POSITION ADOPTED BY W. PRITCHARD, THE SECOND PRIZE WINNER. *From a* [Photograph.]

out the length of a working day. It gained the boy a first prize, however, so it is certainly rapid and cleanly.

Another dexterous style is to hold the tuber upon the upper portion of the leg, paring outwards to the right. The style chiefly practised during the evening by many

“gallery,” when the boy Hazell, with a triumphant chuckle, turned his empty bucket upside down and shouted, “Done, sir!” He had peeled 28lb. of potatoes in 18min. 25sec. Truly, a wonderful spell of work. His face was scarlet and the perspiration streamed from his brow as he finished. As, however,



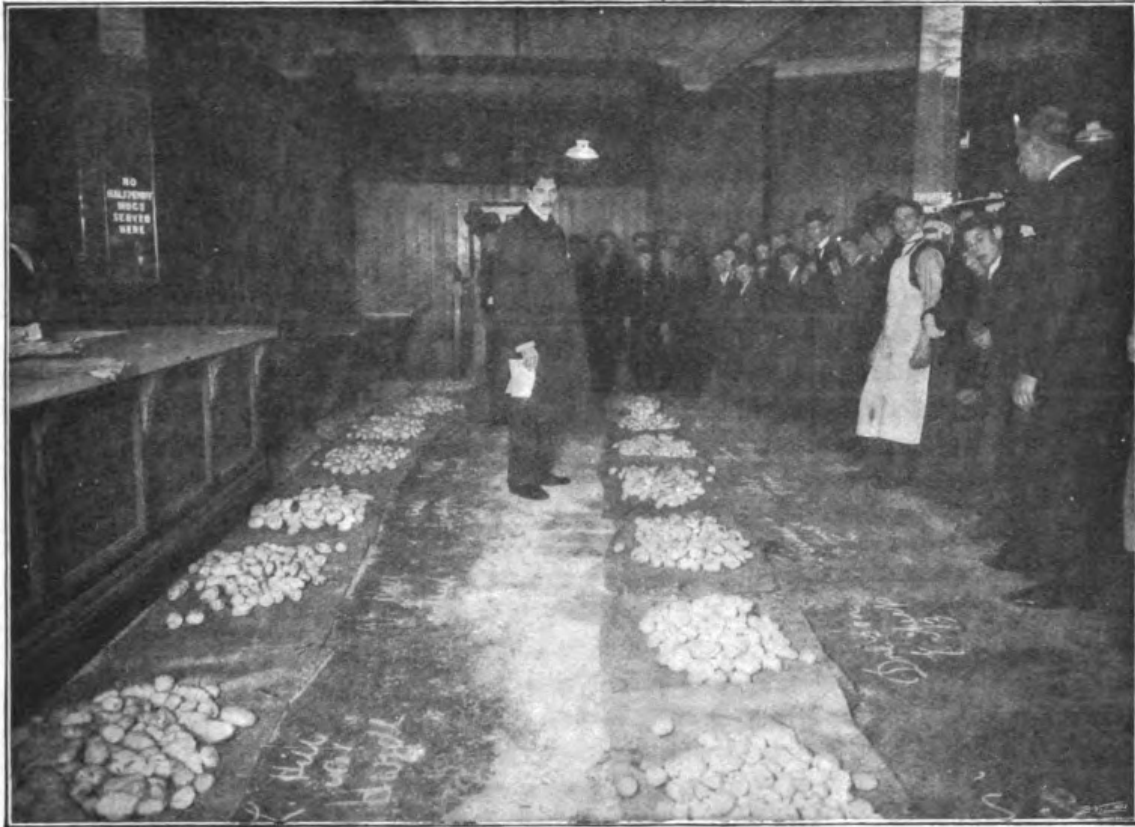
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A POTATO PEEL BY THE FIRST PRIZE WINNER.

[Photograph.]

of the boys was the old-fashioned method—adopted with success by the second prize winner—of gripping the potato in the left palm and paring the peel towards the wrist. Others held the “nobby ones” in the left

his peeling hardly came up to the standard of cleanliness, he was only allowed the third prize. The second boy, Goddard, of Victoria Hall depôt, completed his 28lb. one minute and a half later, the others follow-



From a]

THE JUDGE DECIDING ON THE BEST-PEELED HEAP.

[Photograph.

ing at intervals varying from one to five minutes.

When all had finished, each boy's work was turned out for inspection by the judges, who duly decided that for excellence in clean peeling, irrespective of time occupied, J. Goddard, of Victoria Hall, was entitled to first place, and W. Pritchard to the second.

Although there was no band to

play "See the Conquering Heroes Come" as Goddard and Pritchard made their way to the street, they received a vociferous round of applause from the combined forces of the invisible "gallery" and the visitors.

The writer desires to acknowledge the courtesy of Mr. Pearce in enabling the accompanying photographs to be taken under difficult circumstances.



J. GODDARD, FIRST PRIZE WINNER (ON THE RIGHT), AND W. PRITCHARD, SECOND PRIZE WINNER.

From a Photograph.