

Pliny (1, 28, c. 2), to describe a different direction of the thumb, uses the verb "premere" thus:—"Pollices, cum faveamus, premere, etiam proverbio jubemur," (*Whenever we faveus, we are ordered even by the proverb to press (down) the thumb*). From Statius, *Theb.* v. 26, we find that to "infestus pollex" is given the meaning to turn and lift up: "Infestus pollex est conversus, et subvertus, quin talis esse aversantium solet, et damnantium." (*Because such is wont to be the mark of opposition and of condemnation.*)

Prudentius, a poet of the fourth century, describes the conduct of a virgin at one of these gladiatorial contests in a passage which may be translated as follows: "And, as often as the victor thrusts the sword into the throat, the modest virgin says it is her delight, and orders the breast of the vanquished to be pierced, by turning up her thumb."¹ So far as I have been able to ascertain, this perhaps is the most original and authentic interpretation of the words "pollice verso," and of the gesture which the words imply. It will be seen that the poet was describing a gladiatorial scene, and was giving the sign to smite, not only as he himself understood it, but, perhaps, as he himself had seen it; for, though the contests were prohibited by Constantine, A.D. 325, they were not finally abolished until the reign of Theodoric II. in A.D. 500. In the *Epodes* of Horace, a passage occurs in which the poet speaks of the thumb being used to indicate flattery: "The flatterer will praise your sports (pursuits) with both his thumbs."²

By reference to Facciollati and Forcellini it will be found that these quotations are given to prove that the upturning of the thumb was the signal to kill, and the authors themselves say: "In the thumb was an intimation of favour and affection, for those favouring turned it down (*premebant*), those opposing and disapproving turned it back again and lifted it up."³ One of the best known and most widely used Latin dictionaries—the familiar "Andrews"—refers to the subject in the same way, under the heading "pollex:" "To close down the thumb (*premere*) was a sign of approbation; to extend it (*vertere, convertere, pollex infestus*) was a sign of condemnation."

To those who hold the opinion that the depressed thumb indicated a desire to spare the vanquished gladiator must be added the name of Professor Huxley. In *The Century*, for February, 1888, in comparing the animal world to a gladiator's show, he writes: "The spectator has

¹ "et quoties victor ferrum jugulo inserit, illa delicias ait esse suas, pectusque jacentis virgo modesta jubet converso pollice rumpi." (1. 3, cont. Symmach, v. 1007.1)

² "Fautor utroque tuum laudabit pollice ludum" (1. Ep. 18, v. 661.)

³ "In pollice erat favoris studique significatio, nam faventes premebant, aversantes improbantque vertebant retro, et subrizebant."