

JUVENAL VERSUS GEROME.

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PEOPLE who write at random on subjects of which they are ignorant, or who wilfully draw upon their imagination for their facts, are liable, as might be expected, to go far astray. "*Connu*," says a reader, "why announce like an oracle what is acknowledged as an axiom?" Because this axiom, dear reader, cannot be repeated too often—because, from neglecting to bear it in mind, many writers of respectable repute are continually blundering in matters of fact, which should be well known to every ordinary student. In all branches of human knowledge there are certain standard works, which state the required facts clearly, and may, in most instances, be considered trustworthy. How comes it that these works are too often not consulted, while the *soi-disant* facts of inferior compilations are hastily adopted? That such is the case, we have abundant evidence, and much harm, no doubt, is frequently the result. The repetition of the same error by a number of writers will naturally impress it on the minds of the public, or, at any rate, may mislead a large body of readers. A singular instance of the misrepresentation of a fact was lately brought under my notice, and though the error which I shall discuss inflicts no injury on the community, and may by many be regarded as utterly unimportant, it may perhaps be not uninteresting to notice it briefly.

Most of us are familiar, by means of photographs or engravings, with a

picture by Gérome, entitled "*Pollice Verso*." It represents a gladiatorial contest in the Roman arena. A combatant, known as a *mirmillo* (from the image of a fish on his helmet), has vanquished a *retiarius*, or netter, and has him at his feet, completely at his mercy. The victor is looking to the Vestal Virgins, and the spectators generally, for the sign either to kill or to spare. "To be, or not to be—that is the question." The thumbs of all are pointed downwards, and thus signify the unanimous decision. What is that decision?

M. Gérome, if he gave the title to his own painting, evidently considers that *pollice verso* is to be translated, "with thumb turned down." A short time ago, while I was examining with a friend a photograph of the picture, he asked me to translate the motto literally. I replied that it means "with thumb turned up," and is a quotation from a line in Juvenal, adding that the motto and the action of the spectators are at variance, and that either the motto should be *pollice presso*, i.e., "with thumb turned down," to correspond with the action depicted; or, the thumbs of the on-lookers should be turned up to accord with the quotation. At the same time I remarked, that any Encyclopædia would confirm my statement. As Chambers' Cyclopædia was in the house I forthwith referred to it, and in the article on *Gladiator* read, to my astonishment, as follows: "When one of the combatants was disarmed,