

doubt. Then from the podium comes the signal to kill. The Vestals ignore the appeal for mercy, and press down their thumbs, and yet Dr. Sudth (p. 198) states that, "his fate depended upon the people, who pressed down their thumbs if they wished him to be saved, but turned them up if they wished him to be killed, and ordered him to receive the sword (*ferrum recipere*), which gladiators usually did with the greatest firmness." These views are supported by the Rev. Canon Farrar in his immensely interesting historical tale, *Darkness and Dawn*, or *Scenes in the Days of Nero*:

"Which of us will win?" I asked Glanndon, with a sad smile.

"You," said the Phrygian, "you are stronger than I am and taller."

"Yes, but you are quicker and more active, and you can't tell how I hate that net of yours. I know you will catch me in it."

"If I do, you will still have fought so well that *the people will all turn down their thumbs, and you will be spared.*" Later in the story, when the combat is over, the author expresses the same view (p. 60): "The Samnites were victorious, and the net-throwers were all wounded and dropped their arms, except Onesimus. They knelt with their forefingers uplifted, and, as they had fought with courage, and had been hardly used, handkerchiefs began to be waved in their favour, and thumbs to be turned *downwards.*" A third reference of similar tenor follows (p. 61): "Filled with pity, they turned their thumbs *downwards* in sign that the combat should be stopped and the lives of the defeated *spared* Never had they seen a more astonishing or gallant feat. The retiarius—and he a mere tyro—had, single-handed, defeated four Samnites in succession. The thing was unheard of. Every thumb was *turned up* for Onesimus to give the finishing stroke to his conquered enemy."

The opinion held by Canon Farrar that turning the thumbs down was a signal of mercy is often entertained, and it is not surprising to find a reviewer advancing it by way of correction. In a notice of *Paul, A Tragedy of Glamour*,¹ the author is taken to task. "We notice," writes his critic, "two classical errors in the early part of the play, which an author who dates his preface from Oxford ought to have avoided. The line,

"The down-turned thumb tells that my doom must be,"

embodies a common error, as the *down-turned thumb* was the signal for *sparing* a gladiator's life, not for *condemnation*. An Oxford man should

¹ *The Illustrated Review*, vol. 3, p. 605.