

THE TURNING OF THE THUMB.

Many have had the good fortune to see Gérôme's famous picture, "The Gladiators." Very many more are familiar with it by means only of photographs or engravings. But few of the hundreds of thousands who have seen either the original or the copy have stopped to consider the archaeological accuracy of the artist's composition, or to question his interpretation of a sign followed at one time with such momentous result to the Roman gladiator. Artistic license in producing effect would be, and is, no doubt, a just excuse for the French painter's error, if error it be; and that it is an error appears to be the view of the author of *The Art Gallery of the Centennial Exhibition* in *The Art Treasures of America*, a work that has, perhaps, done more than any other, unless it be *The Boys' Own Annual*, to familiarize the multitude with the picture itself.

It is not denied, and never has been denied, that the artist's intention was to give the death signal. The title of the picture proves this.¹ But whether or not his interpretation is the death signal is a vexed question. The contest is between a mirmillo and a retiarius—the former so called because he has the image of a fish (mormyr) as the crest of his helmet; the latter so called because, in addition to his trident (tridens), he fights with a net (rete), with which he seeks to entangle his adversary. The retiarius was lost. He is vanquished. His cry is "Submitto!" Yet his outstretched arm with upturned thumb is a demand for his own death, a highly improbable request; that is, if it be classically correct to say that the upturned thumb was the signal to kill. The artist is at least consistent. If the gesture of the Vestals is right, then that of the retiarius is right. But is it right? "That is the question," as Hamlet says.

In Dr. Smith's *Dictionary of Antiquities* we find that, "when a gladiator was wounded, the people called out 'habet' or 'hoc habet'; and the one who was vanquished lowered his arms in token of submission." Now this is not the gesture of the retiarius in Gérôme's painting, though the signal he there gives is that of submission beyond a

¹ *Ave, Caesar, morituri te salutant.*