

THE ' VARSITY:

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ANNOUNCEMENT.

During the progress of the College and University Examinations the 'Varsity will not be published. A number will be issued containing the results of the Examinations in the three faculties.

POLLICE VERSO.

In the *Canada Educational Monthly* for October last there appeared a paper by Mr. Geo. Murray, of Montreal, headed 'Juvenal versus Gerome.' The writer did not happen to meet with the paper until some time after it appeared, and, being struck with its contents, investigated the matter for himself, and as it is a curiously controverted point, it may be of interest to your readers. The occasion of the paper referred to was Gerome's picture of a fight between a *Mirmillo* and a *Retiarius*, and the idea of Mr. Murray is that the suggestion of the picture is the death of the *Retiarius*. The fallen man appeals to the spectators, and especially to a gallery of women, who are spoken of by Mr. Murray as the vestal virgins, but who appear to us to be the ladies of the imperial household; they turn down their thumbs, and the title of the picture is *Pollice Verso*. Mr. Murray urges that if the suggestion is the death of the *Retiarius* the attitude is wrong. He claims that *pollice verso*, although in that case the proper title of the picture, does not mean 'thumbs down' but 'thumbs up.' He appeals to the following passages in support of his views:

Juvenal, Sat. 3, 36.—'Munera nunc edunt, et verso pollice vulgi quemlibet occidunt popularitum.'

Pliny, Book 28, chap. 5.—'Pollices, cum faveamus, premere etiam proverbio jubemur.'

Prudentius contra Symmach, 1097.—'Pectusque jacentis virgo modesta jubet converso pollice rumpi.'

Horace, 1 Epist., 18, 66.—'Fautor utroque tuum laudabit pollice ludum.'

He also refers to Whyte Melville's tale of *The Gladiators*, and Lord Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii*. The latter dodges the point.

These quotations, which are well enough known, would certainly seem to prove that *pollicem vertere* is the unfavorable sign; *pollicem premere*, the favorable. Mr. Murray points out that Chamber's *Encyclopædia sub voce* 'Gladiator,' Hobhouse's note on Gladiators to illustrate canto iv. of Childe Harold, Ramsay's *Roman Antiquities*, Wilkin's *Roman Antiquities*, and Bohn's *Translation of Pliny*, all err in stating exactly the reverse. Smith's *Dictionary of Antiquities* and Appleton's *American Encyclopædia* will be found to agree with his own view.

Now, where shall we find what the ancients themselves understood by *pollice verso*? The only passage the writer has been able to find clearly explanatory of the attitude is in Quintilian, Book xi., chap. 3. *Fit et ille habitus qui esse in status pacificator solet, qui inclinato in humerum dextrum capite, brachio ab aure protenso, manum infesto pollice extendit.* If any person will strike the attitude described he will find his thumb uppermost—upright—and as this is the *infestus* position, it describes *pollice verso*, that is, the thumb turned back. This is the view of Facciolati in his dictionary, who explains the matter thus: *In pollice erat favoris studique significatio—nam faventes premebant, aversantes improbantque vertebant retro et subrigebant.*

Facciolati also refers to a passage from Apuleius—Vol. I, p. 156, Ed. Valpy—which seems apposite: *Duobus infimis conclusis digitis ceteros eminentes porrigit et infesto pollice clementer subridens infit.* Adopt the position indicated, and the position of the thumb is the same as that described by Quintilian.

Gronovius explains the phrase *verso pollice* by a waving of the interlocked hands or thumbs over the head. Mr. Murray mentions Raperti's suggestion that the thumb was pointed towards the heart as a sign that the victim was to be stabbed there. We have seen *pollice presso*, on the other hand, explained as meaning to sheathe the sword. It does seem to us that the more natural meaning of *vertere* would be to 'turn down' instead of to 'turn back;' but we recollect in our days of

examinations that by a species of mnemonics the phrase which seemed to us more naturally to devote the man to 'down below' really meant to 'up above,' and hence we recollected the fact. We hope some gentleman who has looked into the point will give us the benefit of his investigation and explain, if he can, how *verso pollice* could be construed to mean 'thumbs down!'

With regard to the picture itself, is the suggestion death? The fight seems to have been a good one. Those who give the signal are women, and even in their worst days Roman women did not entirely lose their natural feelings; the crimes of Agrippina were committed for her son's sake; the infamous Julia was good natured although sarcastic; the mother of Caracalla loved her two ruffian children. In all ages, in all times feminine pity has been proverbial; true, we have had the *petroleuses* as we have had to-day the Russian *nihilistes*; but these were and are outbursts contrary to the rule of nature, and in the incident of the picture there was nothing to be gained by needless cruelty, while there is something repulsive in the very idea that women should desire the death of the wretch who has been conquered. Is this disgusting thought the suggestion of the picture? Is it true, as the writer has seen it stated, that the French school believes that *pollice verso* meant 'thumbs down?' Can any of your readers give us chapter and verse in support of that theory? Has the title *pollice verso* been applied by mistake; and is the *Retiarius* to be saved? Possibly some of your readers may be able to answer these questions. They are not to be despised. The first scene of *Romeo and Juliet* shows what a suggestive part of the human body is the thumb; and, as Mr. Murray says, although not now perhaps of much consequence whether it is turned up or down, it was a good deal of consequence to the unfortunate gladiator whose life depended on the sign.

EUREKA.

THE system of distributing registered letters carried out by our post office authorities is no doubt wisely founded on the opinion of the chief officers entertain of the character of the carriers. Yet in comparison with the practice in England, where the carrier brings with him a book in which to obtain a receipt, and delivers the letter, our own is excessively inconvenient.

THE completion of a century since the publication of the *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* seems a fitting time for a mark among metaphysical men. In 1781, right in the midst of the din of approaching political revolutions, came this revolution-worker in the realm of speculation; and here, in 1881, we are enjoying the fruits of both revolutions in comparative peace. Why should not the philosophic among our graduates and undergraduates celebrate the era in some way: a little symposium for instance, about commencement time? Again, in view of the terror the 'vulgar' commonly exhibit when any theme they are pleased to call 'metaphysical' is broached, would it not be well to start some sort of society for the discussion of such subjects after the pattern of the Natural Science Association; call it 'Philosophical,' 'Metaphysical,' or even 'Transcendental;' anything, in fact, to discourage the contemptuous classic.

THE *Crimson* has wisely said: 'Articles on weighty subjects, when published in a College paper, are compelled for very lack of room to be insufficient and fragmentary.' One might add to these defects a long list of charges, including bombast, superficial thought (and that rarely original), egotism, and a cheap sentimentalism. But it would be invidious and untrue to say that (according to its lights) the College paper is worse than any other form of newspaper. The *Cuckoo* is very likely right (in its prospectus) in holding that the era of leading articles is dead, and the day of the paragraph is at hand. Certainly about Examination time ponderous essays are revolting; and even the erotic rhymes of the *Crimson* are not to be tolerated.

A CURIOUS tale of attempted tyranny is told in this week's column of University and College News. Arbitrary rules have been laid down by professors in all parts of the country; teachers, with their short-lived