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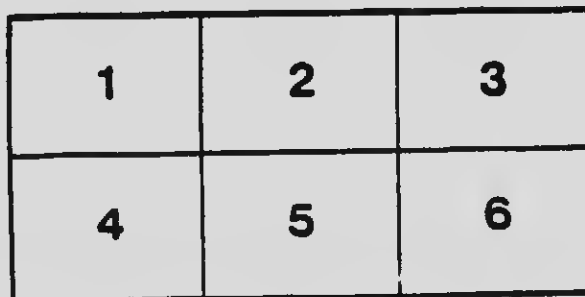
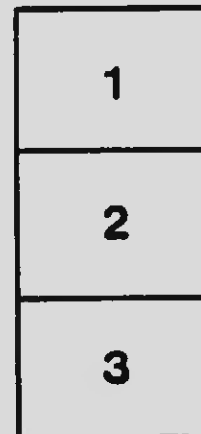
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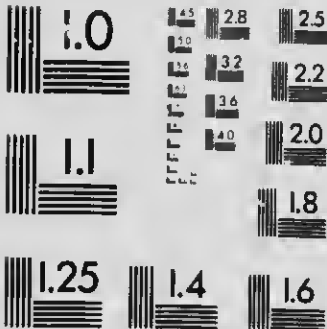
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THE TURNING OF THE THUMB.

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.*

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 Glanydon, 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.

remember his Juvenal—'et verso pollice vulgi Quemlibet occidunt populariter.' Nor is this the only instance of the kind that has come to my notice.

In one of Mr. Richard Dowling's novels the author turned down the thumb as the sign of death; and *The Athenæum* (1861) reproved him for his mistake. Whereupon, Mr. Edmund Yates in *The World* of January 25th, 1882, came to the rescue of Mr. Dowling, and expressed a fear from this reproof that his own long and early faith in the meaning of "pollice verso" was tottering.

The view we are discussing is expressed twice by the author of *The Gladiators*. "Occasionally," writes Mr. Whyte-Melville, "some vanquished champion of more than common beauty, or who had displayed more than ordinary address and courage, so wins the favour of the spectators that they sign for his life to be spared. Hands are turned outwards with the thumb pointing to the earth, and the victor sheathes his sword, and retires with his wounded antagonist from the contest; but more generally the fallen man's signal for mercy is neglected. Ere the shout of "A Hit" has died upon his ears, his despairing eye marks the thumbs of his judges pointing upwards, and he disposes himself to 'welcome the steel' with a calm courage worthy of a better cause."¹

The second reference is equally pointed: "Then, with a numerous party of friends and clients, Licinius made a strong demonstration of mercy; the speed of foot, too, displayed by the vanquished, and the obvious cause of his discomfure, acted favourably on the majority of spectators. Such an array of hands turned outwards, and pointing to the earth, met the eye of Placidus, the Tribune, that he could not but forsake his cruel purpose. So he gave his weapon to one of the attendants who had now entered the arena, took his cloak from the hands of another, and, with a graceful bow to the spectators, turned scornfully from his fallen foe."²

In all probability, the differences of opinion arise from the use of the verb "vertere" by so many ancient writers in connection with the movement of the thumb: Thus, from Juvenal (Sat. III, v. 36), "Muneramne edunt, et verso pollice vulgi, Quemlibet occidunt populariter," "And to win popularity, they slay whomsoever the people, by turning (up) the thumb, order." For giving to the word "verso" the "up" turning of the thumb, Facciolati and Forcellini may be cited.³ Then

¹ *The Gladiators, a Tale of Rome and Judea*, by G. J. Whyte-Melville, p. 139, chapter 19, "The Arena."

² *Ibid.*, p. 117, chapter 15.

³ "Totius Latinitatis Lexicon, consilio et cura Jacobi Facciolati, opera et studio Ogdilii Forcellini."

Pliny (1, 28, c. 2), to describe a different direction of the thumb, uses the verb "premere" thus:—"Pollices, cum favemus, premere, etiam proverbio jubemur," (*Whenever we favour, 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, quia 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." (l. 3, cont. Symmach, v. 1007.1)

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

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

no need to turn his thumbs down, as no quarter is given." The well-known Canadian author and classical scholar, Mr. George Murray, to whom I am deeply indebted for information on this most interesting subject, suggests that, "If some ignorant people object to Huxley's being quoted on a classical question, we have proof that he was perfectly acquainted with the terms of the Roman arena. In an essay published in *The Reader*, of May 20th, 1865, and afterwards in his *Lay Sermons*, etc., page 21, the following is to be found: "Let us have sweet good graduates by all means. They will be none the less sweet for a little wisdom; and the golden hair will not curl less gracefully outside the head by reason of there being brains within. Nay, if obvious practical difficulties can be overcome, let those women who feel inclined to do so descend into the gladiatorial arena of life, not merely in the guise of 'retiarie' as heretofore, but as bold 'sicaria' breasting the open fray."

In speaking of Mr. George Murray, I am reminded that one of his friends at Oxford, the distinguished Oriental scholar, Sir Edwin Arnold, favoured the opinion with which this portion of my article more especially deals—the opinion that "thumbs down" signified mercy. Before passing to the contrary view, some additional references may be given to show how varied and extensive is the literature in which the depressed thumb is taken to be a sign of clemency. It comprehends not merely the works of popular writers, but also those of recognized scholars. In his *Roman Antiquities*, John Lankre writes as follows (p. 13): "Lookers-on had a strange way of expressing the approbation or disapprobation of the manner in which the gladiator fought. If they thought favourably of a man who lowered his arms in token of submission, they raised their hands and pressed their thumbs downwards, and by this means saved his life; but, if they were unfavourable, they turned up their thumbs, and by this sign ordered his antagonist to slay him." The same view is held by Robert Hunter, A.M., F.G.S., and Professor Charles Morris in the new Revised Encyclopedic Dictionary (1898) and it can, I think, be sustained by a quotation from Guhl & Koner's *Life of the Greeks and Romans* (p. 562): "In case the spectators lifted their clinched fists (*verso pollice*) the fight had to be continued; the waving of handkerchiefs was the sign of mercy granted." Among scholars of high repute who should be placed in the same list must be included Professor Mayor, with whom, I may add, Professor Glover, of Cambridge, a recent occupant of a classical chair in Queen's University, Kingston, agrees. Professor Mayor's opinion is clearly stated in the following words: "Those who wished the death of a conquered gladiator turned

(vertebant, convertebant) their thumbs towards their breasts as a signal to his opponent to stab him. Those who wished him to be spared, turned their thumbs downwards (premebant) as a signal for dropping the sword." In Rupert's edition of Juvenal there is a suggestion supporting Professor Mayor's opinion, namely, that the thumb was pointed upwards and inwards to the heart as a sign that the fallen man was to be run through there, and in accordance with this suggestion, the Rev. A. J. Maclean, one of the editors of the *Bibliotheca Classica*, holds to the opinion that the people expressed their approbation by turning their thumbs down, and the reverse by uplifting them.

Before concluding this portion of my article with a few comments on the turning of the thumb towards the breast to signify that the conquered gladiator was to be killed, an appropriate quotation from a little volume entitled *Society in Rome under the Caesars* may be given.¹ According to the author: "The general practice was for the spectators to express their wishes as to the fate of the prostrate combatant by a motion of the thumb, which was turned to the breast to indicate the death thrust, or moved downwards to signify the dropping of the weapon." And he adds, on the authority of Tacitus, that these mute gestures were often accompanied by loud shouts, "dissono clamore."

The act itself of turning the thumb towards the breast is suggestive. It made self-evident what was meant, if it could be seen; and we can take it for granted, if the signal was to be promptly obeyed, that it was one which had to be easily seen and readily understood. The great height from the arena to the podium would possibly render such a signal indistinct. It certainly would be indistinct if, at the moment of defeat, the successful gladiator happened to be across the arena or at one end of it, to the right or left of the podium, in a colosseum large enough to hold, perhaps, eighty or a hundred thousand human beings. Nor was it safe, when in doubt about the sign, to rely upon the cry of the spectators. Indeed, on such occasions, the eye was a safer guide than the ear, for the savage shouts² of the assembled thousands were meant not alone for the combatants, but by way of censure of some hated minister, or even of the not less hated sovereign. Here alone, by the license of the circus, the populace could freely express themselves, and in this way, and by this means, it is said,³ they compelled Tiberius to restore a statue which he had taken to his own palace from the Baths of Agrippa. This

¹ *Society in Rome under the Caesars*, by William Ralph Inge, M.A., Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, and Assistant Master at Eton (p. 57).

² *Habet! Accipe ferrum! Occide, ure, verbera! Quare tam timide incurrit in ferrum? Quare parum libenter moritur? Sen. Ep. 7. 4.*

³ Plin. H. N. 34. 62.

license was the opportunity of the Roman people. Their outcries led more than once to the fall of powerful leaders, for in proportion as freedom of speech was denied at all other times, so was it the more effective when pronounced on these occasions of political liberty. Rival leaders organized beforehand rival bands; and rival shouts, each trying to drown the other, produced on these occasions a veritable pandemonium. Hence it would be dangerous, indeed, for the gladiator to depend for any indication of the sign upon the opposing cries of the intensely excited spectators. Yet, there are many who hold to the view that the signal to kill was the turning of the thumb inwards towards the breast. Mr. Edward Strachan, author of *The Art Gallery of the Centennial Exhibition*, tells us that most people believe that the gesture of condemnation in the circus was made by turning in the thumb towards the breast. But, however inaccurate Gérôme may be in his illustration, no demonstration however clear would have induced him to admit in his painting the accuracy of this sign of condemnation. Such would have deprived the picture of all artistic effect, had he adopted it. Looking at the picture then, all one could see would be the outer part of the clinched hand. The thumb itself would be completely hidden from view, no matter what might be the real sign to kill in the time of Nero. For the artist to turn the thumb towards the heart in the picture would have hidden the thumb and made the picture meaningless.

On the other hand, the list of writers asserting that death was signified by turning the thumb down and not up, is a formidable one, including, as it does, novelists, poets, and scholars of high standing. The quotations I have selected from their works are just as pointed as those that precede, while, at the same time, their varied character may of itself prove interesting to the general reader. Naturally the work of fiction that occurs first of all to the mind of novel readers is *Quo Vadis? A Narrative of the Time of Nero*, in which the customs of the arena are referred to several times. The three quotations given illustrate the author's view. We find at page 62, chapter 7, that Vestinius says: "Thou art mistaken! I hold with Cæsar." "Very well," answered Petronius, "I have just maintained that thou hast a glimmering of understanding, but Cæsar insists that thou art an ass without mixture." "Habet," said Cæsar, laughing and turning down the thumb as was done in the Circus, in sign that the gladiator had received a blow and was to be finished."

The second quotation brings before us a divided circus (p. 128, chapter 45): "The whole circus was trembling from plaudits and the roar of the people. For those who had bet on Calendio, he was at that moment greater than Cæsar; but for this very reason all animosity

against the Gaul vanished from their hearts. At the cost of his blood, he had filled their purses. The voices of the public were divided. On the upper seats, half the signs were for death and half for mercy; but the retiarius looked only at the box of Cæsar and the Vestals, waiting for what they would decide. To the misfortune of the fallen gladiator, Nero did not like him, for at the last games before the fire he had bet against the Gaul, and had lost considerable sums to Licinius; hence he thrust his hand out of the podium, and turned his thumb towards the earth. The Vestals supported the sign at once. Calendio knelt on the breast of the Gaul, drew a short knife from his belt, pushed apart the armour around the neck of his opponent, and drove the three-edged blade into his throat to the hilt.

The third quotation shows the wavering Emperor finally deciding for mercy (p. 501, chapter 65): "Then the enthusiasm of the multitude passed everything seen in the circus before. The crowd stamped and howled. Voices for mercy grew simply terrible . . . but Cæsar halted and hesitated . . . self-love would not let him yield to the wish of the multitude, and still he did not dare to oppose it through his inborn cowardice. So he gazed around to see if among the Augustians he could not find *fingers turned down in sign of death*. But Petronius *held up his hand*, and looked almost challengingly in Nero's face. Vestinius, superstitious, but inclined to enthusiasm, gave a sign for mercy also. So did Scevinus, the Senator, and many others . . . Nero understood that to oppose longer was simply dangerous . . . He looked once more at Subrius Flavius; at Scevinus, the Centurion, a relative of the Senator; at the soldiers; and, seeing everywhere frowning brows, moved faces, and eyes fixed on him, *he gave the sign for mercy.*"

Although the opinion of the popular novelist cannot, in many cases, be regarded as authoritative, still, in a comprehensive survey, the inclusion of novelists who write for the young, and are widely read by them, may not be without point. In *Berie, the Briton; a Story of the Roman Invasion*, by Henty, is to be found the following (p. 218): "Were you a gladiator once, asked Berie? Certainly, I was, answered Scopus, and so were all the Masters of the Schools . . . I was ten years in the arena and fought thirty-five battles. In thirty I was victorious, in the other five I was defeated; but, as I was a favourite, and always made a good fight, *the thumbs were turned up*, which, as you know, *is the signal for mercy.*"

And again, at page 263, we read: "So tremendous was the blow that Lupus fell an inert mass upon the ground . . . Scopus

leaned over the fallen man. He was insensible, but breathed, being simply stunned by the weight of the blow. Scopus held up his own hand, and the *unanimous up-turning of the thumbs showed that the spectators were well satisfied with the skill and courage with which Lupus had fought.*"

Again, at page 105 of *A Book of Golden Deeds*, by Charlotte M. Younge, is to be found the following: "The Romans were not apt to have mercy on the fallen. Fights of all sorts took place—the light armed soldier and the netsman—the lasso and the javelin—the two heavy-armed warriors—all combinations of single combat, and sometimes a general *mêlée*. When a gladiator wounded his adversary, he shouted to the spectators, "hoe habet"—"he has it," and looked up to know whether he would kill or spare. *If the people held up their thumbs, the conquered was left to recover if he could. If they turned them down, he was left to die;* and if he showed any reluctance to present his throat for the death-blow, there was a scornful shout "receipe ferrum"—"receive the steel."

It will be noticed by readers that the few last authors quoted are not of the same opinion as the writer of the present article. "Who shall decide when doctors disagree?"

The Earl of Southesk in a piece of verse called *The Anchorite*, in which the rhymes are dubious and the situation less classical than melodramatic, writes:

"His searching glances fall on me,
He marks my anxious agony.
'Ha! Ha! Be it thine to speak,' saith he,
'To save or slay. Doom! haste the doom!
The upward or the downward thumb?'"

That graceful poet Lord Houghton, in his *Fall of Alipius*, gives us the same view:

"Sat then Alipius silent there alone
With fast shut eyes, and spirit far away.
Remained he there as stone upon the stone,
While the flushed conqueror asked the sign to slay
The stricken victim, who despairing, dumb,
Waited the sentence of the downward thumb."

It is surprising that sculpture has given so little assistance to either side of the argument. We know that, as to the Olympic Games, it was almost a universal thing to erect statues to the victors, and even to per-

petuate the memory of great borses by monuments. With the Roman artist, too, a favorite subject was the gladiatorial combats. The Capitoline Museum, and the Museum of the Louvre, each furnishes us with statues of gladiators. The tomb of Scaurus is decorated with bas-reliefs moulded in stucco. On the frieze are written the names of gladiators, their owners, and their victories. Woodcuts, from these bas-reliefs, show a combatant asking for mercy with the up-lifted arm and index finger, as in Gérôme's great picture. But, so far as I have been able to learn, there is absolutely nothing in this way to indicate the significance of the signs in question. I have been told that there is, or was, in the Museum at Naples, a terra-cotta relief alleged to be of the sign of mercy (*missio*). The thumb was turned and held in the palm of the hand, and concealed by the four fingers. But that alone, without some authoritative explanation (and there is none), proves nothing, except to suggest that "premere" may have had another meaning than "to press downwards." The same uncertainty exists in regard to discoveries at Pompeii of hands modelled in clay. While the gesture can be seen, there is nothing left to tell us what the gesture means.

The distinctively different tastes of the Greeks and Romans in regard to public shows may possibly account for the existence of statuary evidence in the one case, and its absence in the other. In Rome, the games appealed to the passions; in Greece, to the refined side of man's nature. In Rome, a combat was tame and uninteresting without the abundant sacrifice of human blood. Murder was a welcome and grateful spectacle, and the people took a savage delight in seeing old men and infants, women and girls, torn to pieces by wild beasts. Not so with the Greeks, to whom this butchery was unknown. When, from the rivalry between Athens and Corinth, it was sought to introduce the Roman games into the former City, Democritus, the cynic, cried out his protest: "First throw down the altar erected above a thousand years ago, by our ancestors, to mercy." Mercy was the rule, never the exception, in the Grecian games, and Cicero recognizes this when he says: "To conquer at Olympia was almost, in the estimation of the Grecians, more great and glorious than to receive the honour of a triumph at Rome." But while Cicero conceded the cruelty and inhumanity of the Circus, he excused its practices when guilty men were compelled to fight. "Two aqueducts were scarce sufficient to wash off the human blood, which a few hours sport shed in these imperial sbambles . . . and, when glutted with bloodshed, ladies sat down in the wet and steaming arena to luxurious suppers." The desire for novelty drove the people to every form of barbarous excess.

No variety of atrocity, however inhuman, failed of favourable appreciation. The insatiable craving for blood only whetted the appetite. Of Galerius it was said, "he never supped without human blood." Seneca denounced these games. Plutarch condemned them. Petronius and Junius Mauricius opposed them. Marcus Aurelius tried to render them harmless, and other pagans doubtless protested. Still the games and their influence were the mainspring of Roman life and frequently formed the subject of conversation. Children in their amusements had their contests after the manner of the arena; and the noblest women of the Empire were known to crave the embraces of the successful gladiator. Apart from their fascination, the people wanted them as the one opportunity for expressing public opinion; and Caesar continued them because in the excitement of the games the people would forget about politics.

In wrestling or boxing, in the *Pancratium* or the *Pentathlon*; in the throwing of the quoit; in the foot-race, horse-race, and chariot-race, with the Greek there always existed a spirit of moderation, mercy, and humanity. These spectacles were things of delight. Their repeated solemnization tended to elevate and make men gentle and humane. The Roman shows sought to make men brave, but tended to degrade. The one was a pleasure to recall, the other a delight to forget. Sorrow, enmity, revenge were the remorseful after-effects of the gladiatorial combat. Delight, friendship, harmony kept fresh and green the spirited incidents of the Olympic feasts. This may be the reason, perhaps, that in Rome the people were not sorry to forget as quickly as possible, and cared little to preserve anything designed to make them remember. It is known that for a period of nearly seven centuries, down to the burning of Rome in 1084, statuary in marble received little or no attention. Bronze was the material. Of the thousands of such statues few escaped demolition. Christianity and Paganism both shared in the wholesale system of devastation. On the plea that pagan error should no longer bear evidence, Gratianus, by imperial decree, ordered the general destruction of artistic treasures; and the violent resentment of Christians against the pagan aristocracy, for years of cruelty, in turn caused the latter for sake of revenge to aid and abet mob-craze for wanton spoliation.

And so, antique monuments failing us, we are thrown back to a condition of perennial doubt on this, perhaps trivial, but ever-recurring question. We have seen how contradictory are the views of those who have introduced the gesture as a picturesque detail in their verses and stories. When we turn to writers of greater authority in such matters, we again find variance.

In *The Canadian Spectator* of February 19th, 1881, "Laclede" in his "Ephemerides," while paying a high but just compliment to Mr. George Murray's scholarship, combats his views on this vexed question. He says: "With all possible deference, I venture to enquire where there is a single classical passage showing that "vertere" is used to indicate an upward direction. The verses of Juvenal and Prudentius cannot be cited, as they are precisely the ones that we wish to elucidate. Is there not reason to say that the two signals given by the Vestal Virgins in the Amphitheatre were, first, "premere pollicem," doubling the fingers round the thumb to signify grace; second, "vertere pollicem," turning down the thumb of the right hand to signify death?"

It would be difficult indeed to find such a passage, and it is this that occasions the great confusion of opinion. But taking "vertere" as found in Juvenal (III. v. 36), and "premere" as found in Pliny (I. 28, c. 2), can there be much doubt that, as "premere" indicates to press down, so "vertere" indicates to turn up? But the answer to "Laclede" had better come from the Rev. Joseph C. Carrier, C.S.C., Librarian and Curator of the Museum, College of St. Laurent, near Montreal—an authority on the subject. In a letter dated May 12th, 1888, addressed to *The Montreal Star*, approving of Mr. George Murray's views upon the subject, he writes as follows:—"It is quite true as I contend that "vertere" means to turn up or down, as the case may be, whether in English, French, or Italian. But "vertere" taken in connection with "premere" can mean only to turn up, as "premere" signifies press down or upon, to depress. Now, it is well known that the ancient Romans who frequented the amphitheatres had a way of showing their favour or their disfavour towards the gladiators by a peculiar motion of their right hand thumb, *i.e.* pollice verso or pollice presso, as, *e.g.*, we read in Pliny. They expressed their favour towards the defeated combatant by pressing the thumb on the index (premere pollicem), and their disfavour, by lifting up the same thumb towards their own breast (vertere pollicem); and when the sword of the victor had executed the mimicry of the uplifted thumbs, the blood-thirsty multitude expressed their satisfaction by shouting "hoc habet," which may be translated by the single interjection "there!" In French, "il en tient," "he's got it."

Chambers' Encyclopædia holds with "Laclede." In the article on gladiators we find the following: "When one of the combatants was disarmed or on the ground, the victor looked to the Emperor, if present, or to the people for the signal of death. If they raised their thumbs, his life was spared; if they turned them down, he executed the fatal mandate."

Again, Sir John Cam Hobhouse, in his note on Gladiators, to illustrate *Carto IV* of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, writes: "When one gladiator wounded another, he shouted "hoc habet" or "habet," "He has it." The wounded combatant dropped his weapon, and, advancing to the edge of the arena, supplicated the spectators. If he had fought well, the people saved him; if otherwise, or as they happened to be inclined, they turned down their thumbs, and he was slain."

Ramsay's *Manual of Roman Antiquities*, the author supports this view. He states at page 179: "As soon as a gladiator inflicted a decided wound on his adversary, he exclaimed "Hoc habet." If the injury disabled his opponent, the spectators replied "Habet." The wounded man now *held up his finger* in token of submission. The President, as a matter of courtesy referred to the audience, and, if the man was a favourite and had fought well, the crowd testified their approbation, and he was allowed to retire. But if not, they depressed their thumbs in silence, and the conqueror in obedience to a look from the President, plunged his weapon into the body of the unresisting victim."

Next, we find written by Wilkins, in his *Manual of Roman Antiquities* (p. 105): "When a gladiator was disarmed or wounded, his fate was in the hands of the spectators. If he had fought well and bravely, they signified by applause and by waving of handkerchiefs their wish that he should be spared: but if they were in a cruel mood, or if he had failed to please them, they pointed downwards with their thumbs in silence, and he received the finishing blow." In the translation of Seyffert's *Dictionary of Antiquities* (s.v. "Gladiatores") we find the following: "The sign of mercy (*missio*) was the waving of handkerchiefs: the clenched fist and downward thumb indicated that the combat was to be fought till death."

In Bostock's Translation of the *Natural History* of Pliny the passage, "*Pollices cum faveanis premere etiam proverbio jubemur,*" appears to have received the following explanation: The thumb was turned upwards as a mark of favour, downwards as a mark of disfavour.

Professor Dale, of McMaster University, in the course of correspondence, suggests that, if the verb "premere" is taken to mean "squeeze—hold tight," then "vertere" will mean "extend—stretch out," in a hostile or threatening manner; and this, he says, appears to be the sense of "infestus" in the following passage from Burmann: *Sperat et in salva rietus gladiator harena, Sic licet infesto pollice turba minax.* (III. 82, 87.) "And the conquered gladiator, on the cruel sand, has hope, although the crowd threatens with hostile thumb."

But if we are dependent only upon the word *vertere* the question never can be settled, for *vertere* may be used to signify as many different gestures as there are points to the compass. It is the juxta-position of the two words *vertere* and *premere* that lends force to the contention that *pollice verso* was to turn up, (to kill), and *pollice presso*, to press down, (to save). If it be not so, then my own long and early faith is tottering too, like that of Mr. Yates, whose opinion is the opposite to my own. If then, *pollice verso* was to turn up, (to kill), then the title given by Gérôme to his great picture is a misnomer, and the gesture of the Vestals is inaccurate.

Those authorities are wise who take refuge in a "blameless silence," on this vexing subject. Dr. Goldwin Smith writes that it is, in his opinion, unlikely that the question can ever be settled, unless something more specific can be found in the classics, and Professor Pike, of Queen's, also discreetly declares: "Pending more light, *non liquet*."

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