

## CHAPTER XV.

### VESTA.

VESTA, or Hestia, daughter of Cronus and Rhea, goddess of fire and of the family hearth, and guardian angel of mankind, was worshiped principally throughout Italy, although she also had shrines in Greece and Asia Minor.

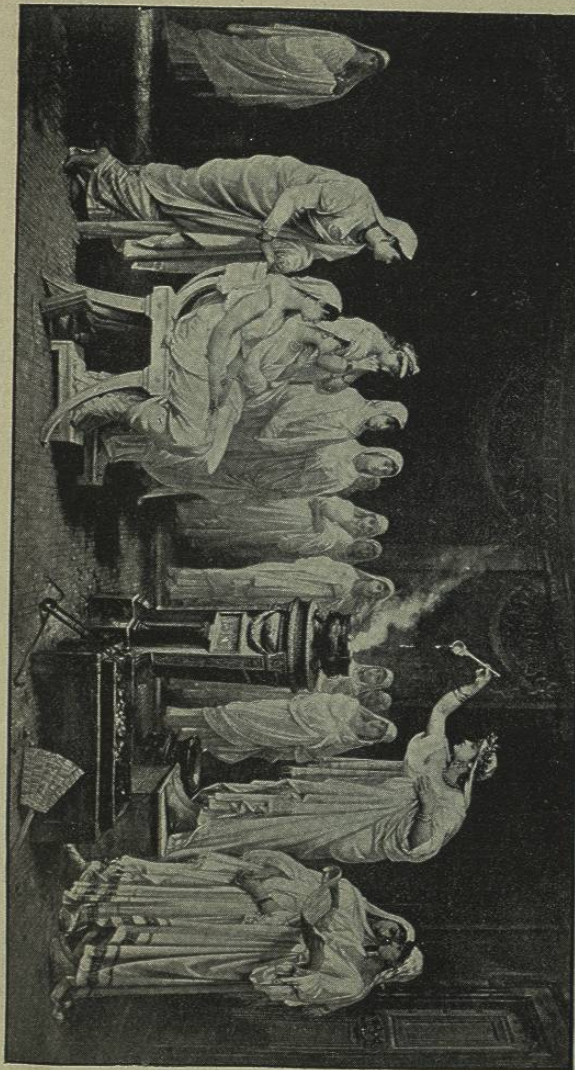
Worship of  
Vesta.

The family hearth in ancient times possessed a far different signification from what it does now, and was considered the family altar, for there the father of the family was wont to offer up his daily prayers and sacrifices. "As, according to the old heathen custom, all men were regarded as enemies unless by a special compact they had been made friends, so Vesta presided especially over true and faithful dealing;" and she was therefore generally represented as pure and undefiled.

A beautiful circular temple in Rome was dedicated to Vesta's service; and here the Palladium of Troy was supposed to be preserved, together with the goddess's sacred fire, originally kindled by the rays of the sun.

This fire — an emblem of the flame of life, which the ancients fancied was kept burning within each human breast by Vesta, the life-giver — was kept constantly burning, and never allowed to go out for want of fuel or timely care. Its flames were also intended to represent the purity of the goddess, who, although wooed by many lovers, — among whom Apollo and Neptune can justly claim the precedence, — remained always a virgin.

The Romans fancied that her worship had been introduced in Italy by Æneas, their famous ancestor, who brought thither his



SCHOOL OF THE VESTAL VIRGINS.—Le Roux.

home gods, and who, according to tradition, selected the first Vestal Virgins.

The second king of Rome, Numa Pompilius, built a beautiful temple, and instituted various religious ceremonies, in honor of

Vesta. The loveliest and noblest among the Roman maidens were chosen to serve this goddess, and were known as Vestals, or Vestal Virgins. Admitted into the temple at the early age of six, they were compelled to serve ten years in fitting themselves to fulfill the duties they would be called upon to perform during the next decade as priestesses and guardians of the sacred fire. The last ten years were spent in instructing the novices; and, when their thirty-years' service was ended, they were at liberty either to continue in the temple, where they were treated with the greatest respect, or to leave it, and even marry, if such were their pleasure.

During their time of servitude, they were expected to keep their vows of chastity and fidelity to their patroness, and to maintain her sacred fire, under penalty of being buried alive in a vaulted chamber, fashioned for this express purpose by Numa Pompilius's order. In turn, each of the priestesses watched the fire, renewed the fuel, and fanned the flame, nor lost sight of it night or day; for the Romans considered the extinction of this sacred flame the precursor of some great public calamity.

The Vestals were, however, so pure and vigilant, that during one thousand years only eighteen failed to keep their vows satisfactorily, and suffered punishment. The Vestal Tuccia was accused of breach of faith, but, as proof of her purity, was given power to carry water in a sieve from the Tiber to the temple.

In return for the signal services the Vestals rendered to the state by maintaining this sacred fire, they enjoyed many privileges: among others, that of being preceded by a lictor with fasces when they walked abroad; of occupying the seats of honor in public ceremonies and festivities; of being buried within the city limits (a privilege granted to but very few); and of obtaining the



THE VESTAL TUCCIA.—Le Roux. (201)

pardon of criminals whom they met by accident on their way to the place of execution. Loved and greatly honored by all, the Vestals have become types of all things pure and lovely in womankind.

“By these her trembling fires,  
Like Vesta's, ever burning; and, like hers,  
Sacred to thoughts immaculate and pure.”

YOUNG.

The Vestal Virgins were further distinguished by a vesture of pure white linen, with a purple border and a wide purple mantle. In time of war or danger they were answerable for the preservation of the sacred fire, which they were allowed to remove to any place of safety; and on several occasions they therefore carried it out of Rome and down the Tiber, lest it should fall into the enemy's hands.

The Vestals continued their office until the reign of Theodosius the Great, who, being converted to Christianity A.D. 380, abolished the worship of Vesta, dispersed the Vestals, and extinguished the sacred fire.

Vesta's services were held with great pomp; and her festivals, the Vestalia, were among the most beautiful and popular in Rome. Statues of this goddess—generally representing a woman of majestic beauty, clad in long robes, holding a lighted torch or lamp in one hand and a votive bowl in the other—were carried through the main streets of the city on all solemn occasions.

In public processions the Vestals had the privilege of carrying their sacred fire; while the Roman matrons, glad to swell their ranks, followed them, barefooted, chanting the praises of the good goddess Vesta.

“And from the temple brings  
Dread Vesta, with her holy things,  
Her awful fillets, and the fire  
Whose sacred embers ne'er expire.”

VIRGIL (Conington's tr.)

On these occasions great banquets were prepared before each house, all daily toil was suspended, the millstones were decked with flowers, and the very asses wont to turn them were covered with garlands and led in the processions.

Among the Romans, Vesta was not the only goddess invoked on the family hearth, for she shared that place of honor with the Lares, Manes, and Penates, who all enjoyed special veneration and sacrifices.

The Lares, quite unknown to the Greeks, were two in number, the children of Mercury and Lara, a naiad famous for her beauty as well as for her extreme loquacity, which no one could check. Tradition relates that this fair maiden talked from morning till night, and told all she knew. Upon one occasion she incurred Jupiter's wrath by relating to Juno a conversation she had overheard between him and one of his numerous ladyloves.

To punish her, and at the same time prevent further tale-bearing, the king of the gods cut off Lara's tongue, and, summoning Mercury, bade him lead her down to Hades to linger there forever. But on the way to the dismal abode of the dead, the messenger god fell in love with his fair charge, who, being now effectually cured of her sole fault, was irresistibly charming; and, instead of obeying Jupiter, he made love to her, and by pantomime obtained her consent to their union. She bore him two children, who from her were called Lares, and to whom the Romans always paid divine honors, reserving special places for them on the family hearth, for they were supposed to preside over houses and families. Their statues resembled monkeys covered with the skins of dogs; while at their feet a barking dog, the symbol of their care and vigilance, was always represented.

The Manes—a name generally applied to souls when separated from the body—were also reckoned among the Roman divinities, and the illustrious ancestors of different families were often worshiped under this name.

As for the Penates, they presided over the houses and domestic affairs. Each head of a household was wont to choose his own Penates, whom he then invoked as his special patrons. The statues of the Penates were of clay, wax, ivory, silver, or gold, according to the wealth of the family whose hearth they graced, and the offerings generally made to them were a small part of each meal.

Upon removing from one house to another or from one place to another, it was customary for the head of the family to remove his household gods also, and establish them suitably before he thought of his own or his family's comfort, and in return for this kindly care the Penates blessed him with peace and prosperity.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## JANUS.

JANUS, god of the past, present, and future, of gates, entrances, war, and peace, and patron of all beginnings, although one of the most important of all the Roman divinities, was entirely unknown to the Greeks.

According to some mythologists, he was the son of Apollo; and, although born in Thessaly, he early in life came to Italy, where he founded a city on the Tiber, to which he gave the name Janiculum. Here he was joined by the exiled Saturn, with whom he generously shared his throne. Together they civilized the wild inhabitants of Italy, and blessed them with such prosperity that their reign has often been called the Age of Gold.

“ Saturn fled before victorious Jove,  
Driven down and banish'd from the realms above.  
He, by just laws, embodied all the train,  
Who roam'd the hills, and drew them to the plain;  
There fixed, and Latium called the new abode,  
Whose friendly shores concealed the latent god.  
These realms, in peace, the monarch long controlled,  
And blessed the nations with an age of gold.”

VIRGIL (C. Pitt's tr.).

Janus is generally represented with two faces, turned in opposite directions, because he was acquainted with the past and future as well as with the present, and because he is considered an emblem of the sun, which opens the day at its rising, and closes the day at its setting.