

OUR TABLE.

PEOPLE'S EDITIONS OF STANDARD WORKS.

THE MESSRS. Chambers, of Edinburgh, have recently commenced the publication of an extensive series of valuable and standard works, of which there are now no copyrights existing in Britain, with the view of placing them within the reach of the great mass of readers. They have succeeded to admiration. By means of this enterprising attempt, the best works in the English language have found their way into general circulation, and the universal taste for the higher order of literature which they cannot fail to impart will speedily become a prominent feature in the characters of the people of the United Kingdom, who, by this means, will yet materially increase their intellectual superiority over their neighbours and cotemporaries.

Among a number of specimens of these "cheap editions" which have reached us, we have met with one of a recent *original* date—a series of delightful "Letters from Palmyra," published a year or two ago in the United States, and now republished by the Messrs. Chambers. These Letters, taken collectively, form one of the most elegantly-written romances of history produced in modern times,—a romance which will place its author in a very elevated position among the authors of his country, whose literature the tale before us is eminently calculated to adorn.

The scene of the events detailed in these Letters, is Palmyra—a city, of which,—to adopt the words of an excellent writer,—“the history is unknown—rising in an eastern desert, shewn to the world but for a single age, in the height of its almost unparalleled splendour, and then becoming the spoil of a Roman army and its savage leader, who laid waste in a few days what was never to be restored. After this, a cloud of obscurity settled over it, and its ancient glories were almost regarded as fabulous; till, in the latter part of the seventeenth century, a few English merchants, from the factory at Aleppo, found their way to its wonderful ruins, and brought back a tale for which they scarcely obtained credit—which, indeed, caused their veracity to be questioned. Zenobia, the Queen of the city, has been a name for poetry and painting, and history represents her as a woman of extraordinary intellect and beauty, united with great strength of character; an Asiatic princess, with Grecian refinement and Roman hardihood.” The devotion of her people to her service was such as has never been witnessed by the world, either before or since.

Different in almost every respect was her rival and conqueror, Aurelian. Originally the son of a peasant, and subsequently a common soldier in the Roman ranks,—by his skill in arms, his fierce courage, and savage ferocity, he raised himself to the throne of Imperial Rome—then calling herself mistress of the world. There was nothing of the Ruler in him save the power to control the will and the actions of men—there was no desire on his part to make men either wiser or better. The only end for which he seemed to believe them born was to add to his blood-purchased fame. His nature was not, it is true, wholly devoid of generous impulse; but the sway of such feelings was but momentary, and often gave way to yet fiercer bursts of destructive violence.

The romance has its foundation in the wars and jealousies of these rival powers, and in the utter annihilation of the fated city of Palmyra.

The Roman, Piso, the supposed author of the Letters, visits Palmyra, towards the close of the third century, when, on the eve of its destruction, it is supposed to have been at its highest pitch of grandeur—when the ambition of Zenobia prompted her to cope with the whole weight of the Roman arms, and to defy the power of the soldier-leader of legions, inured to battle and conquest, and who, elated with victory and blood, looked upon all mankind as subject to his control. Her rashness, or whatever it may be called, ended in her own fall, and the erasure of her kingdom from the after history of the world.

The characters are beautifully drawn—the incidents are captivating, though not calculated to startle the reader—the city and its inhabitants are placed before the reader vividly as in a picture. There is nothing to break the illusion that the author is writing only what he has seen. The splendour of the devoted city is evidenced by its now crumbling remains, lying