

THE MAGIC LANTERN MISSION.

THE accomplished editor of the *Review of Reviews*, amid his various schemes for the help of the poor, has propounded one which cannot but be of interest to the photographic world, for it centres round that now familiar instrument, the optical lantern, and, as everyone knows, photography has done more to make the instrument popular than anything else; for it has produced, at a marvellously cheap rate, pictures rich in detail, illustrating all parts of the world, and every branch of knowledge, before which the hand-painted slides of a bygone generation have all but disappeared.

The Magic Lantern Mission has a very wide scope, but its primary object seems to be to make religious services in Sunday schools, chapels, and even churches more popular by means of pictorial illustrations. It seems to be admitted that in this work difficulties will arise, for it is evident that photographs can have but limited application in the illustration of Bible history; indeed, beyond photographs of the Holy Land, and photographic copies of well-known drawings and paintings, it cannot go, unless the promoters of the enterprise are prepared to incur great expense in the employment of special artists to draw designs for them, or to photograph from living models. Beyond this, it is intended that the lantern shall be the prime teacher of a "democratic university," and shall help in a popular system of university extension teaching. Preaching Friars of the lantern are "to undertake to establish in every town and large village a centre of culture, illustrated history, and politics, which will be "attractive enough to command the attention of the corner boy, and yet sufficiently elevated to give instruction to the best informed." We learn incidentally that a certain tea company has in circulation a two hundred guinea lantern and a set of slides, and that they are willing to send the instrument and a capable operator to any town desiring a lantern service, on payment of expenses to and fro. Of the eighty slides "there are only three that can be said to be advertisements of the tea company." The commercial aspect of the enterprise peeps out in another place, for we hear of a firm of country opticians "who are sincerely devoted to the work of Christian Evangelisation," and are delighted to place their lantern at disposal for £2 per night. We fancy that most opticians would be content to provide apparatus for this sum without mixing up a business transaction with more serious considerations.

The Mission aims high. It is rightly stated that there is room for improvement in the art of colouring slides. There is a need, we are told, for a school of slide painters to be attached to the Mission—not mere slide colourers, but painters who feel with and for their subject. Many other hints and suggestions, which we have not space to particularise, are given with regard to carrying out the scheme.

It will thus be seen that the Magic Lantern Mission aims at a general system of education by means of pictures, and the scheme is one which is sure to prove

attractive to those who are not acquainted with what has already been done in the same direction. In this respect it resembles the far vaster scheme propounded by the author of "Darkest England." But those who know how largely the lantern is already in use will be apt to regard the various proposals in the light of what our American friends call "chestnuts."

We venture to say that there is no town or village of any size where the lantern is not already a most familiar means of entertainment and instruction. Our wholesale dealers in lantern slides publish continually new sets of excellent pictures dealing with every conceivable subject which can teach or interest an audience. These sets are bought by all the chief opticians throughout the country, and are let out on hire, with capital readings written by experienced men, to amateur lecturers, clergymen, and others, night after night. It is true that the colouring is sometimes a little gaudy, but this is merely a question of expense. Beautifully coloured slides can be had if the artist is paid a fair sum for producing them, and directly the demand comes for such pictures it is certain that they can be supplied; in short, a most complete organisation for the production and circulation of slides already exists, and it seems childish that a work which is already being done so well, and which competition has made so cheap, should suddenly be placed in untried hands.

As to a new system of University Extension teaching, there is nothing new about it. The suggestion is another "chestnut." Every town has its literary institution or mechanics' institute. Failing these, it has some kind of lecture society, where good lecturers are constantly employed, and where the lantern forms a feature of the proceedings. The business arrangements are so well managed that a ticket admitting to every entertainment of the season can be purchased for a shilling or two. But free lectures are also common. Take, as an instance, those inaugurated at the East End by Dr. Barnado, to which an audience of more than three thousand are attracted every week. In some places, indeed, we learn on good authority that the lantern is almost too common. There are so many amateur workers, and they are so ready to give their services in aid of charities of various kinds, that the lantern does not attract as it once did. Of course this is due, to some extent, to incompetent operators and lecturers, for unless an entertainment of this kind is placed in experienced hands, and carried out by means of good apparatus, it is more dreary than amusing—to say nothing of the educational part of the work. As to the use of the lantern in religious services, that, too, is no new idea. In every optician's catalogue of slides long lists of hymns are given, together with such subjects as "The Pilgrim's Progress," "The Holy Land," and a large variety of semi-religious temperance tales.

If these things can be improved, the best way to do it is to make use of the existing organisation, and to place the matter in the hands of those who have for years made a study of the business. To commence anew on the same lines with amateur producers is to court failure.