

The Blind Lark

Louisa May Alcott

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HIGH up in an old house, full of poor people, lived Lizzie, with her mother and baby Billy. The street was a narrow, noisy place, where carts rumbled and dirty children played; where the sun seldom shone, the fresh wind seldom blew, and the white snow of winter was turned at once to black mud. One bare room was Lizzie's home, and out of it she seldom went, for she was a prisoner. We all pity the poor princesses who were shut up in towers by bad fairies, the men and women in jails, and the little birds in cages, but Lizzie was a sadder prisoner than any of these.

The prince always comes to the captive princess, the jail doors open in time, and the birds find some kind hand to set them free; but there seemed no hope of escape for this poor child. Only nine years old, and condemned to life-long helplessness, loneliness, and darkness — for she was blind.

She could dimly remember the blue sky, green earth, and beautiful sun; for the light went out when she was six, and the cruel fever left her a pale little shadow to haunt that room ever since. The father was dead, the mother worked hard for daily bread, they had no friends, and the good fairies seemed to have forgotten them. Still, like the larks one sees in Brittany, the eyes of which cruel boys put out, that they may sing the sweeter, Lizzie made music in her cage, singing to baby; and when he slept, she sat by the window listening to the noise below for company, crooning to herself till she, too, fell asleep and forgot the long, long days that had no play, no school, no change for her such as other children know.

Every morning Mother gave them their porridge, locked the door, and went away to work, leaving something for the children's dinner, and Lizzie to take care of herself and Billy till night. There was no other way, for both were too helpless to be trusted elsewhere, and there was no one to look after them. But Lizzie knew her way about the room, and could find the bed, the window, and the table where the bread and milk stood. There was seldom any fire in the stove, and the window was barred, so the little prisoners were safe, and day after day they lived together a sad, solitary, unchildlike life that makes one's heart ache to think of.

Lizzie watched over Billy like a faithful little mother, and Billy did his best to bear his trials, and comfort sister, like a man. He was not a rosy, rollicking fellow, like most year-old boys, but pale and thin and quiet, with a pathetic look in his big blue eyes, as if he said, "Something is wrong; will some one kindly put it right for us?" But he seldom complained unless in pain, and would lie for hours on the old bed, watching the flies, which were his only other playmates, stretching out his little hands to the few rays of sunshine that crept in now and then, as if longing for them, like a flower in a cellar. When Lizzie sung, he hummed softly; and when he was hungry, cold, or tired, he called "Lib! Lib!" meaning "Lizzie," and nestled up to her, forgetting all his baby woes in her tender arms.

Seeing her so fond and faithful, the poor neighbors loved as well as pitied her, and did what they could for the afflicted child. The busy women would pause at the locked door to ask if all was right; the dirty children brought her dandelions from the park, and the rough workmen of the factory opposite, with a kind word would toss an apple or a cake through the open window. They had learned to look for the little wistful face behind the bars, and loved to listen to the childish voice which caught and imitated the songs they sung and whistled, like a sweet echo. They called her "the blind lark," and, though she never knew it, many were the better for the pity they gave

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her.

Baby slept a great deal, for life offered him few pleasures, and, like a small philosopher, he wisely tried to forget the troubles which he could not cure; so Lizzie had nothing to do but sing, and try to imagine how the world looked. She had no one to tell her, and the few memories grew dimmer and dimmer each year. She did not know how to work or to play, never having been taught, and Mother was too tired at night to do anything but get supper and go to bed.

"The child will be an idiot soon, if she does not die," people said; and it seemed as if this would be the fate of the poor little girl, since no one came to save her during those three weary years. She often said, "I'm of some use. I take care of Billy, and I couldn't live without him."

But even this duty and delight was taken from her, for that cold spring nipped the poor little flower, and one day Billy shut his blue eyes with a patient sigh and left her all alone.

Then Lizzie's heart seemed broken, and people thought she would soon follow him, now that her one care and comfort was gone. All day she laid with her cheek on Billy's pillow, holding the battered tin cup and a little worn-out shoe, and it was pitiful to hear her sing the old lullabies as if baby still could hear them.

"It will be a mercy if the poor thing doesn't live; blind folks are no use and a sight of trouble," said one woman to another as they gossiped in the hall after calling on the child during her mother's absence, for the door was left unlocked since she was ill.

"Yes, Mrs. Davis would get on nicely if she hadn't such a burden. Thank Heaven, my children aren't blind," answered the other, hugging her baby closer as she went away.

Lizzie heard them, and hoped with all her sad little soul that death would set her free, since she was of no use in the world. To go and be with Billy was all her desire now, and she was on her way to him, growing daily weaker and more content to be dreaming of dear baby well and happy, waiting for her somewhere in a lovely place called Heaven.

The summer vacation came, and hundreds of eager children were hurrying away to the mountains and seashore for two months of healthful pleasure. Even the dirty children in the lane felt the approach of berry-time, and rejoiced in their freedom from cold as they swarmed like flies about the corner grocery where over-ripe fruit was thrown out for them to scramble over.

Lizzie heard about good times when some of these young neighbors were chosen to go on the poor children's picnics, and came back with big sandwiches buttoned up in their jackets; pickles, peanuts, and buns in their pockets; hands full of faded flowers, and hearts brimming over with childish delight at a day in the woods. She listened with a faint smile, enjoyed the "woody" smell of the green things, and wondered if they had nice picnics in Heaven, being sorry that Billy had missed them here. But she did not seem to care much, or hope for any pleasure for herself except to see baby again.

I think there were few sadder sights in that great city than this innocent prisoner waiting so patiently to be set free. Would it be by the gentle angel of death, or one of the human angels who keep these little sparrows from falling to the ground?

One hot August day, when not a breath came into the room, and the dust and noise and evil smells were almost unendurable, poor Lizzie lay on her bed singing feebly to herself about "the beautiful blue sea." She was trying to get to sleep that she might dream of a cool place, and her voice was growing fainter and fainter, when suddenly it seemed as if the dream had come, for a sweet odor was near, something damp and fresh touched her feverish

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cheek, and a kind voice said in her ear:

"Here is the little bird I've been following. Will you have some flowers, dear?"

"Is it Heaven? Where's Billy?" murmured Lizzie, groping about her, half awake.

"Not yet. I'm not Billy, but a friend who carries flowers to little children who can not go and get them. Don't be afraid, but let me sit and tell you about it," answered the voice, as a gentle hand took hers.

"I thought, may be, I'd died, and I was glad, for I do want to see Billy so much. He's baby, you know." And the clinging hands held the kind one fast till it filled them with a great bunch of roses that seemed to bring all summer into the close, hot room with their sweetness.

"Oh, how nice! how nice! I never had such a lot. They're bigger 'n' better 'n' dandelions, aren't they? What a good lady you must be to go 'round giving folks posies like these!" cried Lizzie, trying to realize the astonishing fact.

Then, while the new friend fanned her, she lay luxuriating in her roses, and listening to the sweet story of the Flower Mission which, like many other pleasant things, she knew nothing of in her prison. Presently she told her own little tale, never guessing how pathetic it was, till, lifting her hand to touch the new face, she found it wet with tears.

"Are you sorry for me?" she asked. "Folks are very kind, but I'm a burden, you know, and I'd better die and go to Billy; I was some use to him, but I never can be to any one else. I heard 'em say so, and poor [illustration omitted] Mother would do better if I wasn't here."

"My child, I know a little blind girl who is no burden but a great help to her mother, and a happy, useful creature, as you might be if you were taught and helped as she was," went on the voice, sounding more than ever like a good fairy's as it told fresh wonders till Lizzie was sure it must be all a dream.

"Who taught her? Could I do it? Where's the place?" she asked, sitting erect in her eagerness, like a bird that hears a hand at the door of its cage.

Then, with the comfortable arm around her, the roses stirring with the flutter of her heart, and the sightless eyes looking up as if they could see the face of the deliverer, Lizzie heard the wonderful story of the House Beautiful standing white and spacious on the hill, with the blue sea before it, the fresh wind always blowing, the green gardens and parks all about, and, inside, music, happy voices, shining faces, busy hands, and year after year the patient teaching by those who dedicate themselves to this noble and tender task.

"It must be better 'n' Heaven!" cried Lizzie, as she heard of work and play, health and happiness, love and companionship, usefulness and independence, — all the dear rights and simple joys young creatures hunger for, and perish, soul and body, without.

It was too much for her little mind to grasp at once, and she lay as if in a blissful dream long after the kind visitor had gone, promising to come again and to find some way for Lizzie to enter into that lovely place where darkness is changed to light.

That visit was like magic medicine, and the

"A KIND VOICE SAID, 'WILL YOU HAVE SOME FLOWERS, DEAR?'"

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child grew better at once, for hope was born in her heart. The heavy gloom seemed to lift, discomforts were easier to bear, and solitude was peopled now with troops of happy children living in that wonderful place where blindness was not a burden. She told it all to her mother, and the poor woman tried to believe it, but said, sadly:

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"Don't set your heart on it, child. It's easy to promise and to forget. Rich folks don't trouble themselves about poor folks if they can help it."

But Lizzie's faith never wavered, though the roses faded as day after day went by and no one came. The mere thought that it was possible to teach blind people to work and study and play seemed to give her strength and courage. She got up and sat at the window again, singing to herself as she watched and waited, with the dead flowers carefully arranged in Billy's mug, and a hopeful smile on the little white face behind the bars.

Every one was glad she was better, and nodded to one another as they heard the soft crooning, like a dove's coo, in the pauses of the harsher noises that filled the street. The workmen tossed her sweeties and whistled their gayest airs, the children brought their dilapidated toys to amuse her, and one woman came every day to put her baby in Lizzie's lap, it was such a pleasure to her to feel the soft little body in the loving arms that longed for Billy.

Poor Mother went to her work in better spirits, and the long, hot days were less oppressive as she thought, while she scrubbed, of Lizzie up again; for she loved her helpless burden, heavy though she found it.

When Saturday came around, it rained hard, and no one expected "the flower lady." Even Lizzie said, with a patient sigh and a hopeful smile:

"I don't believe she'll come; but, may be, it will clear up, and then I guess she will."

It did not clear up, but the flower lady came, and as the child sat listening to the welcome sound of her steps, her quick ear caught the tread of two pairs of feet, the whisper of two voices, and presently two persons came in to fill her hands with midsummer flowers.

"This is Minna, the little girl I told you of. She wanted to see you very much, so we paddled away like a pair of ducks, and here we are," said Miss Grace gayly; and as she spoke Lizzie felt soft fingers glide over her face, and a pair of childish lips find and kiss her own. The groping touch, the hearty kiss, made the blind children friends at once, and, dropping her flowers, Lizzie hugged the new-comer, trembling with excitement and delight. Then they talked, and how the tongues went as one asked questions and the other answered them, while Miss Grace sat by enjoying the happiness of those who do not forget the poor, but seek them out to save and bless.

Minna had been for a year a pupil in the happy school, where she was taught to see with her hands, as one might say; and the tales she told of the good times there made Lizzie cry eagerly:

"Can I go? Oh, can I go?"

"Alas, no, not yet," answered Miss Grace sadly, "I find that children under ten can not be taken, and there is no place for the little ones unless kind people care for them."

Lizzie gave a wail, and hid her face in the pillow, feeling as if she could not bear the dreadful disappointment.

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Minna comforted her, and Miss Grace went on to say that generous people were trying to get another school for the small children, that all the blind children were working hard to help on the plan, that money was coming in, and soon they hoped to have a pleasant place for every child who needed help.

Lizzie's tears stopped falling as she listened, for hope was not quite gone.

"I'll not be ten till next June, and I don't see how I can wait 'most a year. Will the little school be ready 'fore then?" she asked.

"I fear not, dear, but I will see that the long waiting is made as easy as possible, and perhaps you can help us in some way," answered Miss Grace, anxious to atone for her mistake in speaking about the school before she had made sure that Lizzie could go.

"Oh, I'd love to help; only I can't do anything," sighed the child.

"You can sing, and that is a lovely way to help. I heard of 'the blind lark,' as they call you, and when I came to find her, your little voice led me straight to the door of the cage. That door I mean to open and let you hop out into the sunshine; then, when you are well and strong, I hope you will help us get the home for other little children who else must wait years before they find the light. Will you?"

As Miss Grace spoke, it was beautiful to see the clouds lift from Lizzie's wondering face, till it shone with the sweetest beauty any face can wear, the happiness of helping others. She forgot her own disappointment in the new hope that came, and held on to the bed-post as if the splendid plan were almost too much for her.

"Could I help that way?" she cried. "Would anybody care to hear me sing? Oh, how I'd love to do anything for the poor little ones who will have to wait."

"You shall. I'm sure the hardest heart would be touched by your singing, if you look as you do now. We need something new for our fair and concert, and by that time you will be ready," said Miss Grace, almost afraid she had said too much; for the child looked so frail, it seemed as if even joy would hurt her.

Fortunately her mother came in just then, and, while the lady talked to her, Minna's childish chatter soothed Lizzie so well that when they left she stood at the window smiling down at them and singing like the happiest bobolink that ever tilted on a willow branch in spring-time.

All the promises were kept, and soon a new life began for Lizzie. A better room and well-paid work were found for Mrs. Davis. Minna came as often as she could to cheer up her little friend, and, best of all, Miss Grace taught her to sing, that by and by the little voice might plead with its pathetic music for others less blest than she. So the winter months went by, and Lizzie grew like mayflowers underneath the snow, getting ready to look up, sweet and rosy, when spring set her free and called her to be glad. She counted the months and weeks, and when the time dwindled to days, she could hardly sleep or eat for thinking of the happy hour when she could go to be a pupil in the school where miracles were worked.

Her birthday was in June, and, thanks to Miss Grace, her coming was celebrated by one of the pretty festivals of the school, called Daisy Day. Lizzie knew nothing of this surprise, and when her friends led her up the long flight of steps she looked like a happy little soul climbing to the gates of Heaven.

Mr. Constantine, the ruler of this small kingdom, was a man whose fatherly heart had room for every suffering child in the world, and it rejoiced over every one who came, though the great house was overflowing and many waited as Lizzie had done.

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He welcomed her so kindly that the strange place seemed like home at once, and Minna led her away to the little mates who proudly showed her their small possessions and filled her hands with the treasures children love, while pouring into her ears delightful tales of the study, work, and play that made their lives so happy.

Lizzie was bewildered, and held fast to Minna, whose motherly care of her was sweet to see. Kind teachers explained rules and duties with the patience that soothes fear and wins love, and soon Lizzie began to feel that she was a "truly pupil" in this wonderful school where the blind could read, sew, study, sing, run, and play. Boys raced along the galleries and up and down the stairs as boldly as if all had eyes. Girls swept and dusted like tidy housewives; little fellows hammered and sawed in the workshop and never hurt themselves; small girls sewed on pretty work as busy as bees, and in the schoolroom lessons went on as if both teachers and pupils were blessed with eyes.

Lizzie could not understand it, and was content to sit and listen wherever she was placed, while her little fingers fumbled at the new objects near her, and her hungry mind opened like a flower to the sun. She had no tasks that day, and in the afternoon was led away with a flock of children, all chattering like magpies, on the grand expedition. Every year, when the fields were white with daisies, these poor little souls were let loose among them to enjoy the holy day of this child's flower. Ah, but wasn't it a pretty sight to see the meeting between them, when the meadows were reached and the children scattered far and wide with cries of joy as they ran and rolled in the white sea, or filled their eager hands, or softly felt for the dear daisies and kissed them like old friends! The flowers seemed to enjoy it, too, as they danced and nodded, while the wind rippled the long grass like waves of a green sea, and the sun smiled as if he said:

"Here's the sort of thing I like to see. Why don't I find more of it?"

Lizzie's face looked like a daisy, it was so full of light as she stood looking up with the wide brim of her new hat like the white petals all round it. She did not run nor shout, but went slowly wading through the grass, feeling the flowers touch her hands, yet picking none, for it was happiness enough to know that they were there. Presently she sat down and let them tap her cheeks and rustle about her ears as though telling secrets that made her smile. Then, as if weary with so much happiness, she lay back and let the daisies hide her with their pretty coverlet.

Miss Grace was watching over her, but left her alone, and by and by, like a lark from its nest in the grass, the blind girl sent up her little voice, singing so sweetly that the children gathered around to hear, while they made chains and tied up their nosegays.

This was Lizzie's first concert, and no little prima donna was ever more pelted with flowers than she; for when she had sung all her songs, new and old, a daisy crown was put upon her head, a tall flower for a scepter in her hand, and all the boys and girls danced around her as if she had been Queen of the May.

A little feast came out of the baskets, that they might be empty for the harvest to be carried home, and, while they ate, stories were told and shouts of laughter filled the air, for all were as merry as if there was no darkness, pain, or want in the world. Then they had games, and Lizzie was taught to play, for till now she never knew what a good romp meant. Her cheeks grew rosy, her sad little face waked up, she ran and tumbled with the rest, and actually screamed, to Minna's great delight.

Two or three of the children could see a little, and these were very helpful in taking care of the little ones. Miss Grace found them playing some game with Lizzie, and observed that all but she were blindfolded. When she asked why, one whispered, "We thought we should play fairer if we were all alike." And another added, "It seems somehow as if we were proud if we see better than the rest."

Lizzie was much touched by this sweet spirit, and a little later showed that she had already

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"WHEN THE VIOLINS BEGAN TO PLAY, LIZZIE FORGOT THE CROWD AND SANG HER SONG IN CLEAR SWEET TONES."

learned one lesson in the school, when she gathered about her some who had never seen, and told them what she could remember of green fields and daisy-balls before the light went out forever.

"Surely my little lark was worth saving, if only for this one happy day," thought Miss Grace, as she watched the awakened look in the blind faces, all leaning toward the speaker, whose childish story pleased them well.

In all her long and useful life, Lizzie never forgot that Daisy Day, for it seemed as if she were born anew, and, like a butterfly, had left the dark chrysalis all behind her then. It was the first page of the beautiful book just opening before the eyes of her little mind, — a lovely page, illustrated with flowers, kind faces, sunshine, and happy hopes. The new life was so full, so free, she soon fell into her place and enjoyed it all. People worked there so heartily, so helpfully, it was no wonder things went as if by magic, and the poor little creatures who came in so afflicted went out in some years independent people, ready to help themselves and often to benefit others.

There is no need to tell all Lizzie learned and enjoyed that summer, nor how proud her mother was when she heard her read in the curious books, making eyes of the little fingers that felt their way along so fast, when she saw the neat stitches she set, the pretty clay things she modeled, the tidy way she washed dishes, swept and dusted, and helped keep her room in order. But the poor woman's heart was too full for words when she heard the child sing, — not as before, in the dreary room, sad, soft lullabies to Billy, — but beautiful, gay songs, with flutes and violins to lift and carry the little voice along on waves of music.

Lizzie really had a great gift, but she was never happier than when they all sang together, or when she sat quietly listening to the band as they practiced for the autumn concert. She was to have a part in it, and the thought that she could help to earn money for the Kindergarten made the shy child bold and glad to do her part. Many people knew her now, for she was very pretty, with the healthful roses in her cheeks, curly yellow hair, and great blue eyes that seemed to see. Her mates and teachers were proud of her, for, though she was not as quick as some of the pupils, her sweet temper, grateful heart, and friendly little ways made her very dear to all, aside from the musical talent she possessed.

Every one was busy over the fair and the concert; and fingers flew, tongues chattered, feet trotted, and hearts beat fast with hope and fear as the time drew near, for all were eager to secure a home for the poor children still waiting in darkness. It was a charity which appealed to all hearts when it was known; but, in this busy world of ours, people have so many cares of their own that they are apt to forget the wants of others unless something brings these needs very clearly before their eyes. Much money was needed, and many ways had been tried to add to the growing fund, that all might be well done.

"We wish to interest children in this charity for children, so that they may gladly give a part of their abundance to these poor little souls who have nothing. I think Lizzie will sing some of the pennies out of their pockets, which would otherwise go for bonbons. Let us try; so make her neat and pretty, and we'll have a special song for her."

Mr. Constantine said this, and Miss Grace carried out his wish so well that, when the time came, the little prima donna did her part better even than they had hoped.

The sun shone splendidly on the opening day of the fair, and cars and carriages came rolling out from the city, full of friendly people with plump purses and the sympathetic interest we all take in such things when we take time to see, admire, and reproach ourselves that we do so little for them.

There were many children, and when they had bought the pretty handiwork of the blind needle-women, eaten cake and ices, wondered at the strange maps and books, twirled the big globe in the hall, and tried to understand

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how so many blind people could be so busy and so happy, they all were seated at last to hear the music, full of expectation, for "the pretty little girl was going to sing."

It was a charming concert, and every one enjoyed it, though many eyes grew dim as they wandered from the tall youths blowing the horns so sweetly, to the small ones chirping away like so many sparrows, for the blind faces made the sight pathetic, and such music touched the hearts as no other music can.

"Now she's coming!" whispered the eager children, as a little girl climbed up the steps and stood before them, waiting to begin.

A slender little creature, in a blue gown, with sunshine falling on her pretty hair, a pleading look in the soft eyes that had no sign of blindness but their steadfastness, and a smile on the lips that trembled at first, for Lizzie's heart beat fast, and only the thought, "I'm helping the poor little ones," gave her courage for her task.

But, when the flutes and violins began to play like a whispering wind, she forgot the crowd before her, and, lifting up her face, sang in clear sweet tones

THE BLIND LARK'S SONG.

WE are sitting in the shadow
 Of a long and lonely night,
Waiting till some gentle angel
 Comes to lead us to the light.
For we know there is a magic
 That can give eyes to the blind.
Oh, well-filled hands, be generous!
 Oh, pitying hearts, be kind!

Help stumbling feet that wander,
 To find the upward way;
Teach hands that now lie idle
 The joys of work and play.
Let pity, love, and patience
 Our tender teachers be,
That, though the eyes be blinded,
 The little souls may see.

Your world is large and beautiful,
 Our prison dim and small;
We stand and wait, imploring --
 "Is there not room for all?
Give us our children's garden,
 Where we may safely bloom,
Forgetting in God's sunshine
 Our lot of grief and gloom."

A little voice comes singing,
 Oh, listen to its song!
A little child is pleading
 For those who suffer wrong.
Grant them the patient magic
 That gives eyes to the blind!
Oh, well-filled hands, be generous!
 Oh, pitying hearts, be kind!

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It was a very simple little song, but it proved wonderfully effective, for Lizzie was so carried away by her own feeling that as she sang the last lines she stretched out her hands imploringly, and two great tears rolled down her cheeks. For a minute many hands were too busy fumbling for handkerchiefs to clap, but the children were quick to answer that gesture and those tears, and one impetuous little lad tossed a small purse containing his last ten cents at Lizzie's feet, the first contribution won by her innocent appeal. Then there was great applause, and many of the flowers just bought were thrown to the little Lark, who was obliged to come back and sing again and again, smiling brightly as she dropped pretty curtsies, and sang song after song with all the added sweetness of a grateful heart.

Hidden behind the organ, Miss Grace and Mr. Constantine shook hands joyfully, for this was the sort of interest they wanted, and they knew that while the children clapped and threw flowers, the wet-eyed mothers were thinking, self-reproachfully, "I must help this lovely charity," and the stout old gentlemen who pounded with their canes were resolving to go home and write some generous checks, which would be money invested in God's savings-bank.

It was a very happy time for all, and made strangers friends in the sweet way which teaches heart to speak to heart. When the concert was over, Lizzie felt many hands press hers and leave something there, many childish lips kiss her own, with promises to "help about the Kindergarten," and her ears were full of kind voices thanking and praising her for doing her part so well. Still later, when all were gone, she proudly put the rolls of bills into Mr. Constantine's hand, and, throwing her arms about Miss Grace's neck, said, trembling with earnestness, "I'm not a burden any more, and I can truly help! How can I ever thank you both for making me so happy?"

One can fancy what their answer was and how Lizzie helped; for, long after the Kindergarten was filled with pale little flowers blooming slowly as she had done, the Blind Lark went on singing pennies out of pockets, and sweetly reminding people not to forget this noble charity.