

PLAIN TALES FROM THE HILLS

by Rudyard Kipling (1888)

LISPETH



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10 Look, you have cast out Love! What Gods are these
You bid me please?
The Three in One, the One in Three? Not so!
To my own Gods I go.
It may be they shall give me greater ease
Than your cold Christ and tangled Trinities.

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*The Convert*¹.

20 **S**he was the daughter of Sonoo, a Hill-man, and Jadeh his wife. One year their maize failed,
and two bears spent the night in their only poppy-field just above the Sutlej Valley on the
Kotgarth side; so, next season, they turned Christian, and brought their baby to the Mission to
be baptized. The Kotgarth Chaplain christened her Elizabeth, and "Lispeth" is the Hill or pahari
pronunciation.

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Later, cholera came into the Kotgarth Valley and carried off Sonoo and Jadeh, and Lispeth
became half-servant, half-companion to the wife of the then Chaplain of Kotgarth. This was after
the reign of the Moravian missionaries², but before Kotgarth had quite forgotten her title of
"Mistress of the Northern Hills."

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Whether Christianity improved Lispeth, or whether the gods of her own people would have done
as much for her under any circumstances, I do not know; but she grew very lovely. When a Hill
girl grows lovely, she is worth traveling fifty miles over bad ground to look upon. Lispeth had a
Greek face--one of those faces people paint so often, and see so seldom. She was of a pale,
ivory color and, for her race, extremely tall. Also, she possessed eyes that were wonderful; and,
had she not been dressed in the abominable print-cloths affected by Missions, you would,
meeting her on the hill-side unexpectedly, have thought her the original Diana of the Romans
going out to slay.

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40 Lispeth took to Christianity readily, and did not abandon it when she reached womanhood, as do
some Hill girls. Her own people hated her because she had, they said, become a memsahib and
washed herself daily; and the Chaplain's wife did not know what to do with her. Somehow, one
cannot ask a stately goddess, five foot ten in her shoes, to clean plates and dishes. So she
played with the Chaplain's children and took classes in the Sunday School, and read all the
45 books in the house, and grew more and more beautiful, like the Princesses in fairy tales. The
Chaplain's wife said that the girl ought to take service in Simla as a nurse or something
"genteel." But Lispeth did not want to take service. She was very happy where she was.

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50 When travellers--there were not many in those years--came to Kotgarth, Lispeth used to lock
herself into her own room for fear they might take her away to Simla, or somewhere out into the
unknown world.

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¹ The Convert: this poem, written by Kipling himself, is supposed to be voiced by an Indian convert to Christianity who finds the new religion cold and loveless and therefore resolves to return to the old indigenous religion.

² Moravian missionaries: the Moravian Brethren, a Protestant sect founded in the 18th century, were active missionaries in India during the early 19th century.

55 One day, a few months after she was seventeen years old, Lispeth went out for a walk. She did not walk in the manner of English ladies--a mile and a half out, and a ride back again. She covered between twenty and thirty miles in her little constitutionals, all about and about, between Kotgarth and Narkunda. This time she came back at full dusk, stepping down the breakneck descent into Kotgarth with something heavy in her arms. The Chaplain's wife was dozing in the drawing-room when Lispeth came in breathing hard and very exhausted with her burden. Lispeth put it down on the sofa, and said simply:

60 "This is my husband. I found him on the Bagi Road. He has hurt himself. We will nurse him, and when he is well, your husband shall marry him to me."

65 This was the first mention Lispeth had ever made of her matrimonial views, and the Chaplain's wife shrieked with horror. However, the man on the sofa needed attention first. He was a young Englishman, and his head had been cut to the bone by something jagged. Lispeth said she had found him down the khud, so she had brought him in. He was breathing queerly and was unconscious.

70 He was put to bed and tended by the Chaplain, who knew something of medicine; and Lispeth waited outside the door in case she could be useful. She explained to the Chaplain that this was the man she meant to marry; and the Chaplain and his wife lectured her severely on the impropriety of her conduct. Lispeth listened quietly, and repeated her first proposition. It takes a great deal of Christianity to wipe out uncivilized Eastern instincts, such as falling in love at first sight. Lispeth, having found the man she worshipped, did not see why she should keep silent as to her choice. She had no intention of being sent away, either. She was going to nurse that Englishman until he was well enough to marry her. This was her little programme.

80 After a fortnight of slight fever and inflammation, the Englishman recovered coherence and thanked the Chaplain and his wife, and Lispeth--especially Lispeth--for their kindness. He was a traveller in the East, he said--they never talked about "globe-trotters" in those days, when the P. & O.³ fleet was young and small--and had come from Dehra Dun to hunt for plants and butterflies among the Simla hills. No one at Simla, therefore, knew anything about him. He fancied he must have fallen over the cliff while stalking a fern on a rotten tree-trunk, and that his coolies must have stolen his baggage and fled. He thought he would go back to Simla when he was a little stronger. He desired no more mountaineering.

90 He made small haste to go away, and recovered his strength slowly. Lispeth objected to being advised either by the Chaplain or his wife; so the latter spoke to the Englishman, and told him how matters stood in Lispeth's heart. He laughed a good deal, and said it was very pretty and romantic, a perfect idyl of the Himalayas; but, as he was engaged to a girl at Home, he fancied that nothing would happen. Certainly he would behave with discretion. He did that. Still he found it very pleasant to talk to Lispeth, and walk with Lispeth, and say nice things to her, and call her pet names while he was getting strong enough to go away. It meant nothing at all to him, and everything in the world to Lispeth. She was very happy while the fortnight lasted, because she had found a man to love.

100 Being a savage by birth, she took no trouble to hide her feelings, and the Englishman was amused. When he went away, Lispeth walked with him, up the Hill as far as Narkunda, very troubled and very miserable. The Chaplain's wife, being a good Christian and disliking anything in the shape of fuss or scandal--Lispeth was beyond her management entirely--had told the Englishman to tell Lispeth that he was coming back to marry her. "She is but a child, you know, and, I fear, at heart a heathen," said the Chaplain's wife. So all the twelve miles up the hill the Englishman, with his arm around Lispeth's waist, was assuring the girl that he would come back and marry her; and Lispeth made him promise over and over again. She wept on the Narkunda Ridge till he had passed out of sight along the Muttiani path.

110 Then she dried her tears and went in to Kotgarth again, and said to the Chaplain's wife: "He will come back and marry me. He has gone to his own people to tell them so." And the Chaplain's wife soothed Lispeth and said: "He will come back." At the end of two months, Lispeth grew impatient, and was told that the Englishman had gone over the seas to England. She knew

³ P. & O. : it was the Peninsular and Orient shipping line, its regular service between India and Britain began in 1844.

where England was, because she had read little geography primers; but, of course, she had no conception of the nature of the sea, being a Hill girl. There was an old puzzle-map of the World in the House. Lisbeth had played with it when she was a child. She unearthed it again, and put it together of evenings, and cried to herself, and tried to imagine where her Englishman was. As she had no ideas of distance or steamboats, her notions were somewhat erroneous. It would not have made the least difference had she been perfectly correct; for the Englishman had no intention of coming back to marry a Hill girl. He forgot all about her by the time he was butterfly-hunting in Assam. He wrote a book on the East afterwards. Lisbeth's name did not appear.

At the end of three months, Lisbeth made daily pilgrimage to Narkunda to see if her Englishman was coming along the road. It gave her comfort, and the Chaplain's wife, finding her happier, thought that she was getting over her "barbarous and most indelicate folly." A little later the walks ceased to help Lisbeth and her temper grew very bad. The Chaplain's wife thought this a profitable time to let her know the real state of affairs--that the Englishman had only promised his love to keep her quiet--that he had never meant anything, and that it was "wrong and improper" of Lisbeth to think of marriage with an Englishman, who was of a superior clay, besides being promised in marriage to a girl of his own people. Lisbeth said that all this was clearly impossible, because he had said he loved her, and the Chaplain's wife had, with her own lips, asserted that the Englishman was coming back.

"How can what he and you said be untrue?" asked Lisbeth.

"We said it as an excuse to keep you quiet, child," said the Chaplain's wife.

"Then you have lied to me," said Lisbeth, "you and he?"

The Chaplain's wife bowed her head, and said nothing. Lisbeth was silent, too for a little time; then she went out down the valley, and returned in the dress of a Hill girl--infamously dirty, but without the nose and ear rings. She had her hair braided into the long pig-tail, helped out with black thread, that Hill women wear.

"I am going back to my own people," said she. "You have killed Lisbeth. There is only left old Jadeh's daughter--the daughter of a pahari and the servant of Tarka Devi⁴. You are all liars, you English."

By the time that the Chaplain's wife had recovered from the shock of the announcement that Lisbeth had 'verted to her mother's gods, the girl had gone; and she never came back.

She took to her own unclean people savagely, as if to make up the arrears of the life she had stepped out of; and, in a little time, she married a wood-cutter who beat her, after the manner of paharis, and her beauty faded soon.

"There is no law whereby you can account for the vagaries of the heathen," said the Chaplain's wife, "and I believe that Lisbeth was always at heart an infidel." Seeing she had been taken into the Church of England at the mature age of five weeks, this statement does not do credit to the Chaplain's wife.

Lisbeth was a very old woman when she died. She always had a perfect command of English, and when she was sufficiently drunk, could sometimes be induced to tell the story of her first love-affair.

It was hard then to realize that the bleared, wrinkled creature, so like a wisp of charred rag, could ever have been "Lisbeth of the Kotgarth Mission."

Etext found at : <http://www.sprog.auc.dk/~riber/plain.htm>

⁴ Tarka Devi: goddess of the dawn, an Indian deity.