

# A Plain Tale from Our Hills by Bruce Sterling

Little Flora ate straw as other children eat bread.

No matter how poor our harvests, we never lacked for straw. So Flora feasted every day, and outgrew every boy and girl her age. In summer, when the dust-storms off the plains scourge our hills, the children sicken. Flora thrived. Always munching, the tot was as round as a barrel and scarcely seemed to sweat.

It was Captain Kusak and his young wife Baratiya who had volunteered to breed her. Baratiya was as proud of her little prodigy as if she had given birth to the moon. Bold strokes of this kind are frequently discussed in Government, yet rarely crowned with success. No one should have resented Baratiya's excellent luck in the venture. Still, certain women in our Hill Station took her attitude badly.

Kusak should have done something useful and tactful about the matter, because he had also hoped and planned for a new kind of child, one fit to live more lightly on our stricken Earth. Captain Kusak tried to speak some common-sense to his wife, I think; but he was clumsy, so this made her stubborn. Baratiya lost friends and her social prospects darkened. She obsessed so single-mindedly about the child that even her husband grew estranged from her.

Baratiya is more sensible now that other such children have been born to us. At the time, though, this woman was the talk of our Station.

You see, though motherhood is the golden key to humanity's future, it can be a leaden burden in the present day. And as for the past—well! Many of us scarcely understand that a mere half-century ago, this world was crowded.

Certain grand people existed in those greater, louder, richer days. These moguls knew that a general ruin was coming to the Earth—for they were clever people. They feared our planet's great calamity, and they schemed to avert it, or at least to adapt to the changes. They failed at both efforts, of course. The heat rose so suddenly that the rains dwindled and the mass of mankind starved in a space of years.

Rich or poor, the ancients perished quickly, but some few of that elite had a fierce appetite for living. Among them was a certain grand lady, a pioneer founder of our own Hill Station. Privately, we call this persistent woman "Stormcrow."

I myself have nothing to say against her ladyship—if not for her, I would have no post within Government. However: if a little girl who eats straw differs from the rest of womankind, then a woman who never seems to age is even more remarkable.

Our Stormcrow is black-eyed, black-haired, slender, brown, clever, learned and elegant, and, taken all in all, a dazzling creature. Stormcrow sleeps a great deal. She pecks at her food like a bird. She lives with her servants in a large and silent compound with shuttered blinds. Yet Stormcrow takes a knowing hand in all we do here.

That old woman has no more morality than a rabbit. You had only to mention her name over the tea-and-oatmeal for every younger woman in the room to pull a sari over her head straightaway. Yet Stormcrow was witty and bright, and astoundingly well-informed—for Stormcrow, despite the world's many vicissitudes, owned a computer. She invoked her frail machine only once a day, using sunlight and a sheet of black glass.

That machine was and is our Station's greatest marvel. Its archives are vast. Even if her own past glories had vanished, Stormcrow still possessed the virtual shadow of that lost world.

They knew a great many fine things, back then. They never did our world much good through the

sophisticated things that they knew, but they learned astonishing skills: especially just toward the end. So: given her strange means and assets, Stormcrow was a pillar of our community. I once saw Stormcrow take a teenage girl, just a ragged, starving, wild-eyed, savage girl from off the plains, and turn her into something like a demi-goddess—but that story is not this one.

We therefore return to Captain Kusak, a brusque man with a simple need of some undivided female attention. Kusak's gifted baby had overwhelmed his wife. So Kusak's male eye wandered: and Stormcrow took note of this, and annexed Kusak. Captain Kusak was one of our best soldiers, an earnest and capable man who had won the respect of his peers. When Stormcrow appeared publicly on Kusak's sturdy arm, it was as if she were annexing, not just him, but our whole society.

Being the creature she was, Stormcrow was quite incapable of concealing this affair. Quite the opposite: she publicly doted on Kusak. She walked with him openly, called him pet names, tempted him with special delicacies, dressed him in past ways.... Stormcrow was clawing herself from her world of screen-phantoms into the simpler, honest light of our present day.

Decent people were of course appalled by this. Appalled and titillated. It does not reflect entirely well on us that we spoke so much about the scandal. But we did.

Baratiya seemed at first indifferent to developments. The absence of her tactless husband allowed her to surrender completely to her child-obsession. Baratiya favored everyone she knew with every scrap of news about the child's digestion and growth rates. However, even if the child of a woman's loins is a technical masterpiece, that is not the end of the world. Not even raw apocalypse can end this world, which is something we hill folk understand that our forebears did not.

Blinded with motherly pride, Baratiya overlooked her husband's infatuation, but some eight lady friends took pains to fully explain the situation to her. Proud Baratiya was not entirely lost to sense and reason. She saw the truth plainly: she was in a war. A war between heritage and possibility.

When Kusak returned home to Baratiya, an event increasingly rare, he was much too kind and considerate to her, and he spoke far too much about incomprehensible things. He had seen visions in Stormcrow's ancient screens: ideas and concepts which were once of the utmost consequence, but which no longer constitute the world. Baratiya could never compete with Stormcrow in such arcane matters. Still, Baratiya understood her husband much better than Kusak understood her. In fact, Baratiya knew Captain Kusak better than Kusak knew anything.

So she nerved herself for the fight.

Certain consequential and outstanding people run our Government. If they send a captain's wife a nicely printed invitation to eat, drink, dance, sing, and to "mingle with society," then it behooves her to attend.

The singing and the dancing are veneers for the issue of real consequence: the "mingling with society," in other words, reproduction. Our gentleman soldiers are frequently absent, guarding the caravans. Our ladies are often widowed through illness and misfortune. Government regards our grimly modest population, and Government does its duty.

So, if the Palace sets-to in a public celebration, there will reliably be pleasant music for a dance, special food, many people—and many private rooms.

"I can't attend this fine ball at the capital," said Baratiya to her husband, "the dust and heat are still too much for little Florrie. But that shouldn't stop you from venturing."

Captain Kusak said that he would go for the sake of civic duty. He then saw to the fancy clothes he had

begun to affect. Baratiya knew then that he was feigning dislike and eager to go the ball. Kusak planned to go to the capital to revel in the eerie charms of Stormcrow—shamefully wasting his vigor on a relic who could not bear children.

If one of our Hill women dresses in her finest garments, that generally means a patchwork dress. Certain fabrics of the past are brightly dyed and nearly indestructible. They were also loomed and stitched by machines instead of human hands, so they have qualities we cannot match. Whenever a salvage caravan comes from a dead city during the cooler months, there is general excitement. Robbing the dead is always a great thrill, though never a healthy one.

In daily life, our hill women mostly favor saris, a simple unstitched length of cloth. Saris are practical garments, fit for our own time. Still, our women do boast one kind of fine dress which the ancients never had: women's hard-weather gear.

Stiffened and hooded and polished, tucked and rucked, our hard-weather gear will shed rain, dust, high wind, mud, mosquitoes—it would shed snow, if we ever had snow. Baratiya was young, but she was not a soldier's wife for nothing: she knew how to dress.

When Baratiya was through stitching her new ball-gown, it was more than simply strong and practical: it was a true creation. Its stern and hardy look was exactly the opposite of the frail, outdated finery that Stormcrow always wore.

The road to the capital is likely our safest road. Just past the famous ravine bridge—a place of legendary floods and ambushes—the capital road becomes an iron railway. So if the new monsoons are not too heavy, a lone woman in a sturdy ox cart can reach the railhead and travel on in nigh-perfect security.

Baratiya took this bold course of action, and arrived at the Palace ball. She wore her awesome new riding habit. She arrived in high time to find her husband drinking fortified wine, with Stormcrow languishing on his arm and pecking at a plate of rice. This sight made Baratiya flush, so that she looked even more gorgeous.

Baratiya deposited her invitation, opened an appointment card and loudly demanded meat.

The Palace is a place of strict etiquette. If a man and a woman at a Palace ball fill their appointment card and retire to a private niche, they are expected to do their duty to the future of mankind. In order to mate with a proper gusto, the volunteers are given our richest foodstuffs: pork, beef.

Much more often than you think, after gorging on that flesh, a man and woman will simply talk together in their private room. It is hard work to breed with a stranger. The fact that this conduct is Government-approved does not make it more appealing. Mankind is indeed a crooked timber, and no Government has ever built us quite straight.

Stormcrow instantly caught the challenging eye of Baratiya, and Stormcrow knew that Baratiya's shouted demand for a feast was a purposeful gesture—aimed not so much at the men, who crowded toward the loud new arrival—but a gesture aimed at herself. Stormcrow was caught at disadvantage, not only by the suddenness of the wife's appearance, but by the stark fact that Captain Kusak seemed to lack much appetite for her.

The old woman's overstated eagerness to enter a private Palace room with Kusak had dented his confidence. Kusak too had been drinking too much—for he was shy, and troubled by what he was about to do. He was a decent man at heart, and he somehow sensed the inadequacy of his paramour.

More to the point, Kusak had never seen his young wife so attractive. Those fact that other men were so

visibly eager for her company made Kusak stare, and, staring, he found himself fascinated. He could scarcely believe that this startling orgiast, shouting for meat and wine in her thunderous gown, was his threadbare little homebody.

Stormcrow smiled in the face of her misfortune and redoubled her efforts to charm. But Stormcrow had overplayed her position. She could not hold Kusak's eye, much less his hand.

Kusak shouldered his way through the throng around his wife.

"I fear that you come too late, Captain Kusak," said Baratiya, swilling from her wine-cup. Kusak, his voice trembling, asked her to grant him a private meeting. In response, she showed him her engagement card, already signed with the names of four sturdy male volunteers.

Kusak begged her to reconsider these appointments.

Then she replied: "Then show me your own program, dear!"

Kusak handed his engagement card to her, with his mustached face impassive but his shoulders slumping like a thief's. Baratiya said nothing, but she smiled cruelly, dipped a feather pen in the public inkwell and overwrote Stormcrow's famous name. She defaced it coolly and deliberately, leaving only her ladyship's time-tattered initials... which are "R" and "K."

Man and wife then linked arms and advanced to a private verandah. They emerged from it only to eat. They publicly demanded and ate the most forbidden meat of all, the awesome fare the pioneers ate when they first founded our Hill Station. It is not pork, neither is it beef. But a man and woman will eat that meat when there is no other choice but death: when their future survival together means more to them than any inhibition from their past. In the plain, honest life of our Hills, it is our ultimate pledge.

A man and woman with a child are of one flesh. When they take a step so grave and public as eating human meat, even Government sees fit to respect that. So wife and husband ate from their own special platter, with their faces burning and their hands trembling with rekindled passion. They ate together with a single mind, like two people stirring the same flame.

Then Stormcrow, who will never again gorge herself in such a way, turned toward me in the lamplight. She confessed to me that she knew herself well and truly beaten.

Then she looked me in the eye and confided: "In the very first days of Creation, a woman could just hand a man an apple and make him perfectly happy. Now this is a twice-fallen world. We women have truly been kicked out of Paradise—and as for the men, they've learned nothing."

I thought otherwise, as is common with me, but I had nothing to say to console her. So I simply stroked the pretty henna patterns on her hands.