

# **Katreiner Has a Vision**

Paul Alverdes

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KATREINER woke up in the middle of the night. It seemed to him that birds were calling. Then he heard the whirring and murmuring of wings away over the house and again the long calls. After that it was far away, but it came again and drew nearer with a rushing and flapping like cloths and flags in the wind. Big flocks those, he thought. Perhaps they are cranes or wild swans and the leaders call to one another through the night. He sat up in bed and listened; but now he heard it only in the far distance and after that there was silence. The moon was shining outside. The light came in at the window and lit up the room, and he saw his young wife in her bed beside him. She lay half on her face and her hair flowed from her in a heavy wave.

This evening, he thought wildly, they'll be over the sea. They'll alight at the foot of black cliffs and at dawn they'll hear the ice roar as it comes down on the glaciers, and they will flap their wings in the pale light, and salt and foam will break in spray on their feet.

Meanwhile his wife stirred and turned over and babbled in a high-pitched little voice and sighed, and then was still again. She is talking to the child in her womb, thought Katreiner, or else the child is talking through her lips. It'll soon be Easter now. What's up with me that I'm not happy? There are tears in my eyes at this moment. I shall be thirty next birthday and I'm still the same donkey. I ought to go on a long journey and lie alone in the forest at night, or crouch on the ice in an unearthly silence, clad in skins, and when I step out from the tent the sky will burn with green flames and I shall be afraid; but my heart will be filled. Must another thirty years pass while I sell cloves and nutmeg and grow rich on indigo and almond oil? And already what have I not forgotten, sitting at table and drinking wine or lying with my wife. He bit his fist and gazed into the moonlight. Suddenly a day ten years before came to his mind. They had thrown the Russians back, and he, a rifleman who had volunteered for the war, was running beside an ammunition wagon; with all his weight he threw himself on to the spokes, shouting and laughing with the rest and tearing at the wheels as though the German Empire and its victory hung upon his efforts. The infantry in open order was far ahead; to right and left the artillery was rattling forward and the gunners

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ran like mad through the deep sand behind their guns; and they roared and laughed and gesticulated to one another, for the heavy shrapnel of the retreating foe was still coming over, bursting again and again in black smoke, and many a man turned a somersault and reeled staggering beneath the horses' hooves. From the high ground they saw far across undulating country threaded with white streams; far and wide rose the pillars of smoke and thunder and stood like whirlpools in the tormented air but the village in front of them engendered from its unearthly glow a black and rocking sky that extinguished the sun and seemed to revolve around a planet of its own. In the orchards in front of it a detachment of Siberian infantry still held its ground, and the troops to which Katreiner belonged were advancing to the attack. He remembered distinctly that he had faced death gladly and without fear. I was utterly at one then, he thought, and had only one heart; I even fancied that it depended on my good shooting and good conduct whether things went well and we gained the day, and after sixteen hours' marching and fighting I shot the bolt home as cleanly as a crack marksman. He felt with his one remaining hand for the empty sleeve of his nightshirt. And now, my dear Katreiner, he said to himself, you have grown fat; and all that is no more than New Year's night fancies, and you'd best get off to sleep, for to-morrow you'll be sitting round a big table with Christians and heathens bartering colours and spices as though nothing had ever happened.

He was half asleep when again he heard the whirring and crying. Now, thought he, I'll just see what is the meaning of it. And he got out of bed. Perhaps the birds have something to tell, or else there's something wrong up there. He was still feeling with his hand for his slippers when the window quivered and flashed with green and yellow and white light, one following the other as though a gigantic wheel of the different colours revolved in front of a sun. He ran with bare feet to the window and looked out. Everything was transformed. The sky flamed and quivered ceaselessly as in thunderstorms, but with an interchanging brightness of light, purple and green and yellow, and all the time the sky was as though thrown open wide and not a star to be seen. But there were flocks of gigantic birds sweeping past over Katreiner's head, with great crests streaming along their necks, and they soared up and up and swirled on endlessly, like great swarms of gnats, to infinity. The earth below was no more than a rounded hillock of smooth green on which sat a naked baby boy who looked up at the birds and laughed at the flashing colours. Look at that, said Katreiner. There is little Johannes. For he recognised him at once as the son who was to be born to him. He had his features and those of his wife, but they were so wonderfully mingled that he seemed to see his wife and himself by turns. But every time he looked at the boy he had changed and become a new being; and yet still fondly known, and more intimately familiar than his wife had ever been.

What a fine little fellow! said Katreiner. He's not a bit afraid. He just watches it all. And now I know you, too, Marie; I've never known before who you were.

Then suddenly seven pillars stood in a ring round the child, and Katreiner saw that they were pillars of thunder made of water and wind and black earth mixed, and they were turning on themselves with a furious motion and climbing to the zenith with an eddying roar.

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But when they had pushed up the roof of the sky they all ignited in white fire, and the flocks of birds flared up and fell in a rain of fire; but look they were stars and now they hovered over the boy's head and ordered themselves in a beautiful array and began to circle in golden swarms round the thundering pillars. But the boy only laughed aloud. Immediately after, it all vanished.

When Katreiner woke in the morning his wife asked, as she leant over him and laughed behind the fall of her hair, what had come over him that night. He had waked her by coming to her bed in his nightshirt and saying: "Sleep on; for all is as it was: namely, Mighty Lord, and also Prince of Peace; but above all Counsellor." With this he had lain down and fallen into a deep sleep from which she could not wake him.

Katreiner pushed the hair from her face and replied: "Some nonsense I was dreaming. But see you make a fine boy of him!" When she laughed and asked how he knew it would be a son, he said, as he looked for his tobacco and pipe, that he was now an old stager, that he had been through the racket, that he had taken a wife and made a child. He had only now to see it well fed. He could do that without careering about. Anyway, he was getting grey hairs.

She did her best to console him and cried out: "Old man? Bogey man! What next? But really you have changed, Katreiner!"

"Oh?" said he, pulling at his pipe which he had lighted, "then I'll stay as I am now." And he screwed up his eyes and laughed.

Later on there were gatherings in his house now and again when they talked and argued about God and Satan; and his friends, getting warmed up with their wine, delighted in explaining for his benefit that the kingdom of everlasting peace was drawing nearer and nearer and that it was now known that the world was an electric body with a few caprices, certainly, of which it would be cured, and then it would be a small matter to fly from star to star; for reason was always attaining to a finer mastery of the universe. At this point Katreiner would grin and contemptuously examine his pipe.

When they asked what he knew or thought about these matters, he replied that he knew nothing whatever. Or if he did know anything it was no more than every donkey knew.

And this was all he could be induced to say.

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