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Opening extract from

The Flying Classroom

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Illustrated by

Walter Trier

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The Flying Classroom



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Translated by Anthea Bell • Illustrated by Walter Trier

PUSHKIN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Chapter One

Climbing the front of the school building · Some sixth-formers practise for dancing class · A form captain who can lose his temper to good effect · A big white false beard · The story of the adventures of The Flying Classroom *· A rehearsal of Johnny's play in rhyme · And an unexpected interruption*

Two hundred stools were pushed back. Two hundred schoolboys stood up noisily and made for the refectory doors in a crowd. Lunch at the Kirchberg boarding school was over.

'Oh wow!' groaned Matthias Selbmann to one of the boys who had been sitting next to him. They were both in the fourth form. 'I'm ravenous! I need a few pfennigs for a bag of cake trimmings from the bakery. Got any cash?'

Fair-haired Uli von Simmern got his purse out of his pocket, gave a couple of coins to his friend, who was always hungry, and whispered, 'Here, Matz! But don't get caught. That handsome Theodor is on duty in the garden. If he sees you going out of the school gates you'll be for it.'

'You can trust me to deal with your silly sixth-formers, scaredy-cat,' said Matthias loftily, pocketing the money.

'And don't forget to come to the gym. We're rehearsing again.'

'I'll be there,' said Matz, nodding, and he disappeared to run off as fast as he could to Mr Scherf the baker in Nordstrasse, who sold bags of cake trimmings cheaply.

It was snowing outside. Christmas was coming. You could positively smell it in the air... Most of the schoolboys ran out into the gardens surrounding the school and threw snowballs at each other, or if they saw someone walking down the path, lost in thought, they would shake the trees as hard as they could to make snow fall off the branches. Laughter from a hundred throats filled the school grounds. Some of the sixth-formers, smoking cigarettes and with their coat collars turned up, strode up Mount Olympus with great dignity. (Mount Olympus was the name that, for decades, had been given to a remote and mysterious hill, out of bounds to everyone but the sixth-form boys. Rumour said that ancient Germanic sacrificial stones stood on this hill, and sinister initiation ceremonies were performed there before Easter every year. Scary stuff!)

Other boys stayed in the school building and went up to the living quarters to read, write letters, have an afternoon nap or do some work. Loud music came from the rooms with pianos in them.

Some boys were skating on the sports field, which the caretaker had flooded the week before to make an ice rink. Then, all of a sudden, there was a fierce scuffle. The ice hockey team wanted to train there, but the skaters didn't want to let them have the rink. A few boys from the younger forms, armed with snow shovels and brooms, were cleaning the ice. Their fingers were freezing, and they made angry faces.

There was an excited crowd of children outside the school, all looking up. Because on the third floor, little Gäbler from the lowest form was balancing on the narrow window sills as he made his way over the front of the building from room to room. He was clinging to the wall like a fly, inching his way slowly sideways across the façade.

The boys watching him held their breath.

At last Gäbler reached the end of his climb and, with a single bound, leaped in through a wide-open window!

'Bravo!' cried the spectators, clapping their hands enthusiastically.

'What's been going on?' asked a sixth-former, arriving a little later.

'Oh, nothing special,' said Sebastian Frank. 'We just asked the screech-owl to look out of the window, because Harry didn't believe that the screech-owl squints.' The others laughed.

'Are you trying to pull my leg?' asked the sixth-former.

'I'd never dare, would I?' replied Sebastian modestly. 'Someone your size? If I tried pulling a leg like yours, I should think I'd sprain my wrist.'

The sixth-former decided to walk on fast.

Then Uli came running up. 'Sebastian, you're supposed to be at the rehearsal!'

'The king commands, and I obey!' declaimed Sebastian with mock solemnity, and he set off at a slow trot.

Three boys were already standing outside the gym: Johnny Trotz, the author of the Christmas play that bore the exciting title of *The Flying Classroom*; Martin Thaler, form captain and

scenery designer; and Matthias Selbmann, who was always hungry, particularly after meals, and wanted to be a boxer one day. He was munching, and held out a few cake trimmings to little Uli as he arrived with Sebastian. 'Here!' he growled. 'Have something to eat so you'll grow up big and strong.'

'If you weren't so daft anyway,' Sebastian told Matz, 'I'd ask how a clever person can eat so much!'

Matthias, a kindly soul, just shrugged his shoulders and went on munching.

Sebastian stood on tiptoe, looked through the window and shook his head. 'Those demigods are dancing the tango again.'

'Come on!' Martin ordered, and the five boys went into the gym.

They obviously didn't think much of the spectacle that met their eyes. Ten sixth-formers, paired off in couples, were dancing on the wooden floorboards. They were practising for dancing class. Tall Thierbach had borrowed a lady's hat, probably from the school cook. He had perched it on his head at a jaunty angle and was moving as if he were a young lady, with his partner's arm elegantly clutching him round the waist.

Martin went over to the piano, where handsome Theodor was sitting, hitting as many wrong notes as he possibly could.

'Those clowns!' growled Matthias scornfully. Uli hid behind him.

'Please, I must ask you to stop,' said Martin politely. 'We want to go on rehearsing Johnny Trotz's play.'

The dancers stopped. Handsome Theodor stopped playing the piano and said, arrogantly, 'Kindly wait until we don't need the gym ourselves any longer!' Then he went on playing. And the sixth-formers went on dancing.



Martin Thaler, the fourth-form captain, went fiery red. He was well known for going bright red like that. 'Please stop now!' he said in a loud voice. 'Dr Bökh the housemaster said we could rehearse in the gym every day from two to three in the afternoon. You know perfectly well he did.'

Handsome Theodor turned round on the piano stool. 'Is that any way to speak to your elders and betters?'

Uli wanted to run away. He didn't like such difficult situations. But Matthias held him firmly by the sleeve, stared angrily at the sixth-formers and muttered, 'Hey, want me to sock that tall fellow one?'

'Calm down,' said Johnny. 'Martin will settle things.'

The sixth-formers were standing in a circle round the small figure of Thaler as if they were going to eat him. Handsome Theodor began playing the tango again. Then Martin pushed the bystanders out of the way, went up close to the piano and slammed its lid down! The sixth-formers were too surprised to do anything about it. Matthias and Johnny made haste to help Martin, but he could manage without them. 'You have to keep the rules just the same as we do!' he told the sixth-formers indignantly. 'Being a few years older than us doesn't make you special! Go and complain about me to Dr Bökh if you like, but you must get out of the gym at once. I insist!'

The piano lid had come down on handsome Theodor's fingers. His face, usually attractive enough for a photograph, was distorted with anger. 'You just wait, laddie!' he said menacingly. But then he left the gym.

Sebastian opened the door and bowed with exaggerated politeness as the other sixth-formers went away too. 'Those smoochy dancers,' he said scornfully when they had gone.

'Twirling around in dancing class with girls who paint their faces—they think the earth revolves around them. They ought to read what Arthur Schopenhauer has to say about women.'

'I think girls are very nice,' said Johnny Trotz.

'And I have an aunt who's a good boxer,' remarked Matthias proudly.

'Come on!' cried Martin. 'Jonathan, the rehearsal can begin.'

'Right,' said Johnny. 'We'll rehearse the last scene again today. It needs more work. Matz, you haven't quite got the hang of your part yet.'

'If my old man knew I was acting in a play he'd take me away from this school like a shot,' said Matthias. 'I'm only joining in to give you lot a hand. Who else could play St Peter, tell me that?'

Then he took a big white false beard out of his trouser pocket and hitched it over his ears so that it covered half his face.

Johnny's play, as I have already told you, was to be performed in the gym as part of the school's Christmas festivities, and it was called *The Flying Classroom*. It had five acts, and it was almost prophetic in a way. It set out to show what school might really be like in the future.

In the first act, a teacher played by Sebastian with a false moustache glued to his upper lip flew off in a plane, taking his whole class, to have geography lessons in whatever part of the world they were studying. 'Lessons on the spot itself,' ran a line of verse in the first act. That wasn't Johnny's line, but had been added by Sebastian, who was very clever and hoped to make the teachers laugh when he declaimed it. Martin, the form captain, was good at drawing, so he had done the scenery. An

aeroplane painted on white cardboard was fixed to the parallel bars in the gym. It had three propellers and three engines, and a door that you could open to get into the plane (or rather, get to the parallel bars).

Uli Simmern was playing the sister of one of the flying schoolboys. He had got his cousin Ursula to send him a dirndl dress. And they were going to hire a blonde wig with long braids pinned up on it from Krüger the barber. They had been to his barber shop last Saturday when they went out, and had tried the wig on Uli. It made him unrecognizable—he looked just like a girl! It cost five marks to hire the wig, but Krüger the barber had said that if they all promised to come to him to be shaved later, when they needed it, they could hire it half-price, and they all promised that they would.

So in Act One the class set out. In Act Two, the plane landed on the rim of the crater of Vesuvius. Martin had painted the mountain erupting in flames on a big piece of cardboard. It looked alarmingly real. They had only to prop the cardboard in front of a high bar in the gym to keep Vesuvius from falling over, and then Sebastian, as the teacher, could deliver his rhyming lesson about volcanoes, and ask his pupils questions about the Roman cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii that were buried under the lava. Finally he lit a cigar at the flame shooting out of the crater painted by Martin, and then the plane went on its travels again.

In Act Three they landed at the pyramids of Giza, walked past the next painted piece of cardboard scenery, and got Sebastian to tell them about the building of those huge tombs for the ancient Egyptian Pharaohs. Then Johnny, painted as white as a mummy, appeared out of one of the pyramids as Ramses II. He

had to bend a bit, because the cardboard pyramid was too small. First Ramses delivered a speech praising the fertile waters of the Nile, and the blessings of water in general. Later he asked how the end of the world, as predicted by his astrologer, was getting on. He was very angry when he heard that the world was still in existence and hadn't yet come to an end, and he threatened to fire the astrologer at once. Uli, playing the part of the girl, had to laugh at the old Egyptian Pharaoh and tell him that the astrologer must have died ages ago. On hearing that, Ramses II made a mysterious sign, and Uli, under a spell, followed him into the pyramid as it slowly closed. Left behind, the others had to be very sad at first, but then they set off once more.

In Act Four *The Flying Classroom* landed at the North Pole. The axis of the earth was sticking out of the snow, and the schoolboys saw with their own eyes that the earth is flattened at the poles. They sent a radio photograph of it to the *Kirchberg Daily News*, listened to a polar bear (played by Matthias wrapped in a fur coat) singing a poetic song about the loneliness of living at the North Pole up there in the snow and ice, they shook the polar bear's paw when they said goodbye, and flew away again.

In the fifth and last act, because of a mistake made by their teacher, causing height control in the plane to fail, they ended up at the gates of heaven. There they met St Peter, sitting in front of a fir tree with candles on it, reading the *Kirchberg Daily News* and celebrating Christmas. He told them that their headmaster, Dr Grünkern, was an old friend of his, and asked how he was. There wasn't much for them to see up here, he said, because heaven was invisible. And they couldn't take photographs either.

The teacher asked if St Peter could get them back the little girl who had been kidnapped by Ramses II and taken into the pyramids. St Peter nodded, recited a magic spell, and Uli promptly came climbing out of a painted cloud! They rejoiced and sang 'Silent night, holy night'.

Then all the spectators, teachers and pupils would sing along too, in celebration of Christmas, and the performance would end happily.

So today they were rehearsing the last act. St Peter, played by Matthias, sat on a chair in front of a painted Christmas tree, and the others—except for Uli, who was still inside the pyramid—stood reverently round him. Matthias scratched his detachable white beard, and sang in a voice pitched as low as he could manage:

Boys like you, ten or eleven,
are not allowed to visit heaven.
You fly your modern plane up here,
to look in through a telescope.
But that is neither here nor there,
For views of heaven you cannot hope.
It has high walls built all around,
You see me, yes—and then the ground.

MARTIN: *That really is a crying shame!*
SEBASTIAN: *Well, we won't worry, all the same.*
We're happy just the way we sound.
ST PETER: *You can't see heaven until you're dead.*
JOHNNY: *A photograph would do instead.*
ST PETER: *No, photographs are not allowed.*

Such things are hidden by a cloud.
Explore what I tell you is suitable,
But you must leave the rest…

Matthias stumbled over the last word. It was too difficult for him, and as he worried about that he forgot the rest of his part. He stared at Johnny the poetic genius, silently apologizing. Johnny went over and quietly prompted him.

'Oh yes. You're right,' said Matz. 'But you see, I'm ravenously hungry, and that always has a terrible effect on my memory.' However, he then pulled himself together, coughed and went on:

Explore what I tell you is suitable,
But you must leave the rest inscrutable.
We know you hate to be forbidden
To see what has to be kept hidden.
But there's far more you have to know
Before such mysteries I show.

JOHNNY: *St Peter's going rather far.*
I'll wait until I go to college
Before amassing all that knowledge.

MARTIN: *Aiming to be a superstar?*

SEBASTIAN: *They say that you know everything,*
St Peter, so do you know whether
The little girl our friend's alive?
She followed Ramses to the wild
Maze of the pyramids together.

ST PETER: *Oh, poor child!*
Now let me try to cast a spell
To bring the lost girl back again

It just might work, though who can tell?
What is past is gone and over,
May she no more be a rover,
Now her steps the path have trod,
Leading you and her to God.
Come with me and…

But at this moment the door of the gymnasium was flung open. Matthias failed to get the next few words spoken by St Peter out of his mouth. The others turned in alarm, and Uli, feeling curious, craned round the painted cloud where he had been waiting to make his entrance.

A boy stood in the doorway. His face was bleeding, and so was one hand. His suit was torn. He flung his school cap angrily to the floor and shouted, 'Do you know what's just happened?'

'No, how could we, Fridolin?' asked Matthias in friendly tones.

'If a day-boy comes back to school after lessons looking as badly beaten up as you,' said Sebastian, 'then I suppose—'

But Fridolin interrupted. 'Never mind all that!' he cried. 'The boys from the secondary school in town attacked me and Kreuzkamm on our way home. They took Kreuzkamm prisoner. And what's more, they stole the dictation exercise books that Kreuzkamm was taking back to his old man to be corrected!' (Kreuzkamm's father taught German at the Johann-Sigismund Grammar School.)

'Oh wow! You mean they've got the exercise books as well?' asked Matthias. 'What a stroke of luck!'

Martin looked at his friend Johnny. 'Are there enough of us?'

Johnny nodded.

'Off we go then !' cried the form captain. 'Over the fence to the allotment gardens! And let's get a move on! We'll meet at No-Smoking's place!'

They raced out of the gym. Uli was running along beside Martin. 'If handsome Theodor catches us, we're done for!' he gasped.

'You can always stay here,' said Matthias.

'Me? Are you nuts?' asked little Uli, offended.

The six boys had reached the outskirts of the school grounds. They climbed the fence and vaulted over it.

Matthias still had his fake white beard over the lower part of his face.