

The Last Lesson

About the author

Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897) was a French novelist and short-story writer. The Last Lesson is set in the days of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) in which France was defeated by Prussia led by Bismarck. Prussia then consisted of what now are the nations of Germany, Poland and parts of Austria. In this story the French districts of Alsace and Lorraine have passed into Prussian hands. Read the story to find out what effect this had on life at school.

Notice these expressions in the text.

Infer their meaning from the context:

in great dread of, in unison, counted on, a great bustle, thumbed at the edges, reproach ourselves with.

I started for school very late that morning and was in great dread of a scolding, especially because M. Hamel had said that he would question us on participles, and I did not know the first word about them. For a moment I thought of running away and spending the day out of doors. It was so warm, so bright! The birds were chirping at the edge of the woods; and in the open field back of the sawmill the Prussian soldiers were drilling. It was all much more tempting than the rule for participles, but I had the strength to resist, and hurried off to school. When I passed the town hall there was a crowd in front of the bulletin-board. For the last two years all our bad news had come from there — the lost battles, the draft, the orders of the commanding officer — and I thought to myself, without stopping, “What can be the matter now? Then, as I hurried by as fast as I could go, the blacksmith, Wachter, who was there, with his apprentice, reading the bulletin, called after me, “Don’t go so fast, bub; you’ll get to your school in plenty of time!” I thought he was making fun of me, and reached M. Hamel’s little garden all out of breath. Usually, when school began, there was a great bustle, which could be heard out in the street, the opening and closing of desks, lessons repeated in unison, very loud, with our hands over our ears to understand better, and the teacher’s great ruler rapping on the table. But now it was all so still! I had counted on the commotion to get

to my desk without being seen; but, of course, that day everything had to be as quiet as Sunday morning. Through the window I saw my classmates, already in their places, and M. Hamel walking up and down with his terrible iron ruler under his arm. I had to open the door and go in before everybody. You can imagine how I blushed and how frightened I was. But nothing happened. M. Hamel saw me and said very kindly, "Go to your place quickly, little Franz. We were beginning without you." I jumped over the bench and sat down at my desk. Not till then, when I had got a little over my fright, did I see that our teacher had on his beautiful green coat, his frilled shirt, and the little black silkcap, all embroidered, that he never wore except on inspection and prize days. Besides, the whole school seemed so strange and solemn. But the thing that surprised me most was to see, on the back benches that were always empty, the village people sitting quietly like ourselves; old Hauser, with his three-cornered hat, the former mayor, the former postmaster, and several others besides. Everybody looked sad; and Hauser had brought an old primer, thumbed at the edges, and he held it open on his knees with his great spectacles lying across the pages. While I was wondering about it all, M. Hamel mounted his chair, and, in the same grave and gentle tone which he had used to me, said, "My children, this is the last lesson I shall give you. The order has come from Berlin to teach only German in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. The new master comes tomorrow. This is your last French lesson. I want you to be very attentive."

"What a thunderclap these words were to me! Oh, the wretches; that was what they had put up at the town-hall! My last French lesson! Why, I hardly knew how to write! I should never learn any more! I must stop there, then! Oh, how sorry I was for not learning my lessons, for seeking birds' eggs, or going sliding on the Saar! My books, that had seemed such a nuisance a while ago, so heavy to carry, my grammar, and my history of the saints, were old friends now that I couldn't give up. And M. Hamel, too; the idea that he was going away, that I should never see him again, made me forget all about his ruler and how cranky he was. Poor man! It was in honour of this last lesson that he had put on his fine Sunday clothes, and now I understood why the old men of the village were sitting there in the back of the room. It was because they were sorry, too, that they had not gone to school more. It was their way of thanking our master for his forty years of faithful service and of showing their respect for the country that was theirs no more. While I was thinking of all this, I heard my name called. It was my turn to recite. What would I not have given to be able to say that dreadful rule for the

participle all through, very loud and clear, and without one mistake? But I got mixed up on the first words and stood there, holding on to my desk, my heart beating, and not daring to look up. I heard M. Hamel say to me, "I won't scold you, little Franz; you must feel bad enough. See how it is! Every day we have said to ourselves, 'Bah! I've plenty of time. I'll learn it tomorrow.' And now you see where we've come out. Ah, that's the great trouble with Alsace; she puts off learning till tomorrow. Now those fellows out there will have the right to say to you, 'How is it; you pretend to be Frenchmen, and yet you can neither speak nor write your own language?' But you are not the worst, poor little Franz. We've all a great deal to reproach ourselves with." "Your parents were not anxious enough to have you learn. They preferred to put you to work on a farm or at the mills, so as to have a little more money. And I? I've been to blame also. Have I not often sent you to water my flowers instead of learning your lessons? And when I wanted to go fishing, did I not just give you a holiday?" Then, from one thing to another, M. Hamel went on to talk of the language in the world — the clearest, the most logical; that we must guard it among us and never forget it, because when a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison. Then he opened a grammar and read us our lesson. I was amazed to see how well I understood it. All he said seemed so easy, so easy! I think, too, that I had never listened so carefully, and that he had never explained everything with so much patience. It seemed almost as if the poor man wanted to give us all he knew before going away, and to put it all into our heads at one stroke. After the grammar, we had a lesson in writing. That day M. Hamel had new copies for us, written in a beautiful round hand— France, Alsace, France, Alsace. They looked like little flags floating everywhere in the school-room, hung from the rod at the top of our desks. You ought to have seen how every one set to work, and how quiet it was! The only sound was the scratching of the pens over the paper. Once some beetles flew in; but nobody paid any attention to them, not even the littlest ones, who worked right on tracing their fish-hooks, as if that was French, too. On the roof the pigeons cooed very low, and I thought to myself, "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?" Whenever I looked up from my writing I saw M. Hamel sitting motionless in his chair and gazing first at one thing, then at another, as if he wanted to fix in his mind just how everything looked in that little school-room. Fancy! For forty years he had been there in the same place, with his garden outside the window and his class in front of him, just like that.

Only the desks and benches had been worn smooth; the walnut-trees in the garden were taller, and the hopvine that he had planted himself twined about the windows to the roof. How it must have broken his heart to leave it all, poor man; to hear his sister moving about in the room above, packing their trunks! For they must leave the country next day. But he had the courage to hear every lesson to the very last. After the writing, we had a lesson in history, and then the babies chanted their ba, be bi, bo, bu. Down there at the back of the room old Hauser had put on his spectacles and, holding his primer in both hands, spelled the letters with them. You could see that he, too, was crying; his voice trembled with emotion, and it was so funny to hear him that we all wanted to laugh and cry. Ah, how well I remember it, that last lesson! All at once the church-clock struck twelve. Then the Angelus. At the same moment the trumpets of the Prussians, returning from drill, sounded under our windows. M. Hamel stood up, very pale, in his chair. I never saw him look so tall. "My friends," said he, "I—I—" But something choked him. He could not go on. Then he turned to the blackboard, took a piece of chalk, and, bearing on with all his might, he wrote as large as he could — "Vive La France!" Then he stopped and leaned his head against the wall, and, without a word, he made a gesture to us with his hand — "School is dismissed — you may go.'

WATCH AND LISTEN TO THE STORY

Click on the link below to watch a video of the story being read. Note the pronunciation of the words and read along.

['The last lesson' Class 12 - chapter 1 NCERT English Audiobook](#)

SUMMARY

'The Last Lesson' by Alphonse Daudet, set during the war between France and Prussia; Germany, in those days, was part of Prussia. Germany took over the territory of Alsace-Lorraine from France, and insisted that the schools there must stop teaching French, and teach German instead. This caused the French language speakers a lot of pain, but they were forced to obey the orders of the German conquerors.

Through the characters of Franz and M. Hamel, the story emphasises patriotism, the importance of mother tongue in preserving identity, and the regret of procrastinating.

The narrator of the story, a little boy, rushed to school one morning. He was scared to go to school because he knew that his stern teacher, M. Hamel, will question him and the rest of the pupils on participles. The narrator knows nothing about participles, as he has not learned the lesson.

He was late getting to school and was surprised to find that the school was unusually quiet. Normally, at the beginning of the day, there is a lot of noise. Desks opening and closing, lessons are being repeated, and the teacher's ruler often hits against the table. But on this morning the school is strangely quiet and still.

Through a window, the narrator saw his classmates already seated, and his teacher M. Hamel walking up and down with his ruler under his arm. The narrator, terrified and blushing, because he is late, is forced to open the door and enter the classroom in front of everyone.

The atmosphere of the classroom was serious. Franz was surprised to see village people assembled on the benches at the back of the room. Everyone looked gloomy.

M. Hamel mounted his chair, and, speaking gravely and gently, announced to the gathered crowd that this will be the last lesson he will teach in this school. An order had arrived from Berlin—seat of the region's Prussian occupiers—that from the next day onward, only German will be taught in the schools of Alsace-Lorraine. A new school master will arrive the next day. M. Hamel further instructs the crowd that he wants them to be very attentive, as this will be their last French lesson.

M. Hamel's words came as a shock to Franz because he suddenly realized how little he knew of the French language. He had not taken his French studies seriously. He barely knew how to write in French, and he is sad that he must stop learning. He is even sorry to think that the stern M. Hamel, whom he fears, is leaving forever.

Many villagers had gathered in the classroom—to show their appreciation for the school and to honor M. Hamel's forty years of service as teacher, as well as to show respect for their country, now occupied by foreigners.

M. Hamel called Franz to recite the rule for the participle, which, of course, he had neglected to learn. More than ever, he is ashamed that he has not learned his lessons. He stands up to recite but stumbles on the first words.

M. Hamel doesn't scold Franz for not knowing the rule, but he used the occasion to lecture the class and the villagers. He told them that they had lost the chance to learn French. This is why the Prussian occupiers have the right to say to them, "you pretend to be Frenchmen, and yet you can neither speak nor write your own language?"

M. Hamel continues by saying that the children's parents have not been anxious to have them learn, sending them out to work instead. M. Hamel also reproaches himself, taking responsibility for those times he had encouraged his students to procrastinate, because he himself wanted to do other things.

M. Hamel then goes on to speak about the beauties of the French language. He encourages the class to guard the language carefully, because, he tells them, when a people are enslaved, so long as they "hold fast to their language it as if they had the key to their prison."

The grammar lesson was followed by a lesson in writing. M. Hamel has the pupils copy out the words "France, Alsace," over and over again. All the students are perfectly quiet as they concentrated on their work.

M. Hamel has been teaching at this school for forty years. Franz thinks that M. Hamel must be heartbroken to be leaving it all. The teacher has to leave the country the very next day.

But Franz is impressed by M. Hamel's determination to oversee every lesson until the very last. The class ended at noon. M. Hamel stood up, pale but tall. He started to talk to the class saying, "My friends," but is unable to continue. He turned to the blackboard instead, and with a piece of chalk he wrote in large letters, "Vive La France!" He leaned his head against the wall and gestured to the class, telling them school is dismissed.

Click on the link below to see a map of the Franco-Prussian War.

<https://share.google/ee5eIMV9cv5ttQjhh>

Click on the link below to see the map of Alsace and Lorraine.

<https://share.google/D8ktQqEjoNbq7zcnH>

Click on the link below to understand how the Franco -Prussian War affected the region of Alsace and Lorraine.

<https://share.google/doW4Cl0EfUQ6hQiV>

VOCABULARY

1. Dread: great fear or worry

I always **dread** my Maths exam.

2. Participles: verb forms used as adjectives

The teacher explained the **participles** in class.

3. Chirping: making short, high sounds like birds

It is soothing to hear the birds **chirping** early in the morning.

4. Sawmill: a place where wood is cut into planks

The workers went to the **sawmill** early.

5. Drilling: making holes with a tool

The mason was **drilling** a hole in the wall.

6. Tempting: making you want to do something

The cake looked very **tempting**.

7. Resist: to stop yourself from doing something

I tried to **resist** eating more chocolates.

8. Apprentice: a student or learner working under a skilled person

The **apprentice** learned from the carpenter.

9. Bulletin: a short news report or announcement

The school posted a **bulletin** on the board.

10. Bustle: busy and noisy activity

The market was full of hustle **bustle**.

11. Unison: doing something together at the same time

The choir sang in **unison**.

12. Rapping: knocking or hitting lightly

She was **rapping** on the door.

13. Fright: sudden fear

The loud noise of the fireworks gave me a **fright**.

14. Frilled: decorated with ruffles

She wore a **frilled** dress.

15. Embroidered: decorated with stitched designs

The sari was beautifully **embroidered**.

16. Inspection: careful checking

The teacher did an **inspection** of the students' uniforms.

17. Solemn: serious and quiet

He spoke in a **solemn** voice.

18. Primer: a beginner's book

She learned reading from a **primer**.

19. Thumbed: worn or dirtied from frequent handling

The old book was **thumbed** from years of use.

20. Spectacles: eyeglasses

My grandfather wears **spectacles**.

21. Mounted: placed or fixed in position

The picture was **mounted** on the wall.

22. Thunderclap: a loud sound of thunder

A **thunderclap** woke me up.

23. Wretches: very unhappy or unfortunate people

The story was about the poor **wretches** who were left in the storm without shelter..

24. Sliding: able to move smoothly along a surface

She went **sliding** across the frozen lake.

25. Nuisance: something annoying

The loud speakers are a **nuisance** during festivals.

26. Cranky: easily annoyed or bad-tempered

My baby brother gets **cranky** when he is tired.

27. Dreadful: very bad or unpleasant

The weather was **dreadful** yesterday.

28. Daring: brave and bold

She was **daring** enough to speak up against the ruler.

29. Reproach: to express disappointment or blame

I **reproach** him for not keeping his promise.

30. Anxious: worried or nervous

I always feel **anxious** before the results.

31. Preferred: liked better

I have always **preferred** tea over coffee.

32. Blame: to say someone is responsible for something wrong

Please do not **blame** me for your mistake.

33. Enslaved: made to work without freedom

Many people were **enslaved** during wars.

34. Patience: ability to wait calmly

You need **patience** to learn a skill.

35. One stroke: in a single movement
He completed the drawing in **one stroke**.
36. Motionless: not moving at all
The cat sat **motionless** as he saw a snake ..

37. Gazing: looking steadily
She was **gazing** at the stars.
38. Hopvine: a climbing plant
The **hopvine** grew along the fence.
39. Twined: wrapped around something
The plant **twined** around the pole.
40. Trembled: shook slightly
I **trembled** with fear when I saw a snake cross the road..
41. Sounded: made a noise
The alarm bell **sounded** loudly and woke me up .
42. Choked: unable to breathe or speak properly
He **choked** on the smoke coming out of the factory.
43. Gesture: a movement of the body to express something
She made a **gesture** to call him over.
44. Commotion – a state of confused noise or disturbance
I went outside to see what all the **commotion** was about.

THINK AS YOU READ

Q1. What was Franz expected to be prepared with for school that day?
Q2. What did Franz notice that was unusual about the school that day?
Q3. What had been put up on the bulletin-board?
Q.3. How did Franz's feelings about M. Hamel and school change?

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Q1. The people in this story suddenly realise how precious their language is to them. What shows you this? Why does this happen?

Q2. Franz thinks, "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons' What could this mean?(There could be more than one answer.)

TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

Q1. “When people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison.”

Can you think of examples in history where a conquered people had their language taken away from them or had a language imposed on them?

Q2. What happens to a linguistic minority in a state? How do you think they can keep their language alive? For example:

Punjabis in Bangalore

Tamilians in Mumbai

Kannadigas in Delhi

Gujaratis in Kolkata

Q3. Is it possible to carry pride in one’s language too far? Do you know what “linguistic chauvinism” means?

WORKING WITH WORDS

Q1. English is a language that contains words from many other languages. This inclusiveness is one of the reasons it is now a “world language”. For example’.

petite – French

kindergarten – German

capital – Latin

democracy – Greek

bazaar – Hindi

Find out the origins of the following words:

tycoon barbecue zero

tulip veranda ski

logo robot trek

bandicoot

Q2. Notice the underlined words in these sentences and tick the option that best explains their meaning:

(a) "What a thunderclap these words were to me!"

The words were

(i) loud and clear.

(ii) startling and unexpected.

(iii) pleasant and welcome.

(b) "When people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison."

It is as if they have the key to the prison as long as they

(i) do not lose their language.

(ii) are attached to their language.

(iii) quickly learn the conqueror's language.

(c) Don't go so fast, you will get to your school in plenty of time. You will get to your school.

(i) very late.

(ii) too early.

(iii) early enough.

(d) I never saw him look so tall.

M. Hamel

(i) had grown physically taller.

(ii) seemed very confident.

(iii) stood on the chair.

NOTICING FORM

1. Read this sentence:

M. Hamel had said that he would question us on participles.

In the sentence above, the verb form “had said” in the first part is used to indicate an “earlier past”. The whole story is narrated in the past. M. Hamel’s “saying” happened earlier than the events in this story. This form of the verb is called the past perfect.

Pick out five sentences from the story with this form of the verb and say why this form has been used.

WRITING

Q1. Write a notice for your school bulletin board. Your notice could be an announcement of a forthcoming event, or a requirement to be fulfilled, or a rule to be followed.

G.D.G. Public School Pune Notice
29th July, 20xx
Sale of Old Spoils Goods Students are hereby informed that our school is organising a sale of its old sports goods like cricket bats, badminton & lawn tennis rackets, footballs, cricket & football gear etc. in the P.E. Room on 2K1 August, 20xx. Those interested in purchasing these can visit the P.E. Room on the assigned date during their free periods or recess time.
Rohit Sports Secretary.

Q2. Write a paragraph of about 100 words arguing for or against having to study three languages at school.

Q3. Have you ever changed your opinion about someone or something that you had earlier liked or disliked? Narrate what led you to change your mind.

THINGS TO DO

Q1. Find out about the following (You may go to the internet, interview people, consult reference books or visit a library.)

(a) Linguistic human rights

(b) Constitutional guarantees for linguistic minorities in India.

Q2. Given below is a survey form. Talk to at least five of your classmates and fill in the information you get in the form.

S. No.	Languages you know	Home language	Neighbourhood language	City/Town Language	School Language
1.					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					

MORE QUESTIONS SOLVED (EXTRA QUESTIONS)

SHORT ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS

Q1. Why do you think little Franz was afraid of being scolded?

Q2. "It was all much more tempting than the rule for participles." What did Franz find 'much more tempting'? How did he finally react?

Q3. "What can be the matter now?" says Franz. Why, do you think, did he make this comment?

4. Who was Wachter? What did he ask Franz and why? How did Franz react?

Q5. What was the usual scene when Franz's school began in the morning?

Q6. How had Franz hoped to get to his desk? What had he to do and why?

Q7. What three things in school surprised Franz most that day?]

Q8. Why had the villagers come to school that day? How did they look?

Q9. "What a thunderclap these words were to me!" Which were the words that shocked and surprised the narrator?

Q10. How did Franz react to the declaration: 'This is your last French lesson'?

Q11. What tempted Franz to stay away from school? [Delhi 2014]

Q12. Who did M. Hamel blame for neglect of learning on the part of boys like Franz?

Q 13. How did Franz and other boys enjoy their lesson in writing?

Q14. How did M. Hamel feel and behave during the last lesson?

Q15. "He had the courage to listen to every lesson until the very last." What led Franz to make this remark?

Q16. What happened when the lesson in history was over?

Q17. "Ah, how well I remember it, that last lesson!" says the narrator. Which scene does he remember more vividly than the others?

LONG ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS

Q1. Why was Franz scared that day ?What did he see on his way to school and how did he get to his desk?

Q2. What order had been received from Berlin that day? What effect did it have on life at school?

Q3. The people of Alsace and Lorraine were forced to study German. They were not allowed to study French. It implies that students of the area were taught only one language. They did not follow the concept of three languages at school. Write an article on the topic Advantages of Three Language Systems at school.