

# 1

## The Last Lesson

*Alphonse Daudet*

### Introduction

The Last Lesson by Alphonse Daudet was written in the days of the Franco-Prussian War in which France was defeated by Prussia led by Bismark. The French district of Alsace and Lorraine passed into Prussian hands. It showcases the fact that the oppressor wants not only territory but also dominates over the language and culture of a particular country thus, taking away even the identity of the subjugated people.

### The Story *Retold*

#### **Franz had not prepared his lesson; sees a crowd in front of bulletin-board**

The author was late for school and dreaded scolding from his teacher, Mr M Hamel who was to question them that day on participles. The narrator had not learnt his lessons. It was a bright day and he felt tempted to stay back from school and enjoy the day but somehow he resisted the temptation to do so. While he was passing by the town hall, he saw a crowd in front of the bulletin-board. Since the war was on, all the bad news had come from that board. As he was hurrying past, the blacksmith called out to him and said there was plenty of time to reach the school in time.

#### **To his surprise; his teacher is kind to him**

When the author reached school, he was very surprised at the eerie silence that surrounded the school. It seemed more like a

Sunday than a working day. He had depended on the commotion to enter the class unnoticed but to his surprise everyone was already in their places and he had to go before everybody. What surprised him even more was that instead of scolding him the teacher was kind and told him to take his place.

**M Hamel is in his special attire; the atmosphere of the class is not the same**

After settling, the narrator, Franz noticed that the teacher was wearing his beautiful green coat, his frilled shirt and his little black silk cap with embroidery on it. This attire was worn by M Hamel only on inspection or prize days. The atmosphere that day was very solemn and what surprised him most was when he saw the village elders sitting in the class on the last benches. Everyone was sad. One of the persons sitting there was old Hauser who had even brought an old primer which he thumbed at the edges. He held it open on his knees.

**Taken aback; regrets when teacher says it is the last lesson**

The narrator wondered at the changes when suddenly M Hamel mounted his chair and announced that it was their last French lesson as the order had come from Berlin that only German will be taught in the schools of Alsace and Lorriane. The narrator was shocked to hear this and suddenly those books which had seemed a burden became very dear to him. He regretted not having learnt his lessons. Now the narrator understood why Mr Hamel had put on his Sunday clothes and why the villagers were attending the class that day. It was their way of thanking the master for his commendable service of forty years and showing respect to their country.

They also regretted missing the school so often. When the class started, the narrator heard his name being called out to recite the rules of the participles which he was unable to do as he got stuck on the first word. He felt very disgusted with himself at his failure to do so. Mr Hamel said he wouldn't scold him for he was, as it is, feeling so bad about it. Everyday learning had been postponed to the next day and now there was no time left to learn. He further said that they would be mocked by people for calling themselves French although they couldn't speak or write their own language.

**Fumbles while reciting participles; is ashamed**

Further, Mr Hamel says even many parents had preferred to send their children to work than to school. Then he confesses that he too was to blame because many times he had given a holiday when he

wanted to go fishing. Mr Hamel said that French was the most beautiful language in the world. It was the most clearest and logical. He then opened the book and explained a grammar lesson to them. The writer was surprised at himself for he understood the lesson very well. Also Mr Hamel had explained the lesson more patiently than ever. It almost seemed as if in one go he wanted to give them all that he knew. The grammar lesson was followed by a writing lesson. That day Mr Hamel had new copies for them in which it was written in beautiful round hand — France, Alsace, France, Alsace. They looked like little flags floating everywhere in the classroom. All the children worked seriously and quietly. Suddenly, the writer heard the pigeons cooing and wondered will they be also made to sing in German.

### **Mr Hamel makes people realise the importance of mother tongue**

While the class was doing their writing assignment, M Hamel sat motionless in his chair staring at all the things as if he wanted to remember just how everything looked in that little school room.

Since M Hamel had started the school forty years ago, nothing had changed except the desk and chairs had worn off and the trees had grown taller. The narrator wonders that it must be heart-breaking for him to hear his sister moving the trunks in the room above, packing to leave the country next day.

### **Mr Hamel is an epitome of patience that day; a patriot to the core**

Mr M Hamel was very patient that day. When it was the chance of the babies to chant the alphabet, even the old villagers joined in. Their voice trembled with emotion. At twelve all of them could hear the Prussians returning from drill. At this overcome with emotion, M Hamel went to the blackboard and wrote, *Vive La France* (Long Live France). He then leaned against the wall and dismissed the class with a gesture.

To sum up, we can say that the story is a wake-up call for all those people who keep on postponing things endlessly. Something like this happened with the natives of Alsace. They had to forego learning their mother tongue. In the same vein, the story extrapolates the fact that war makes man inhuman and insensitive to the feelings of others.

## Intext Questions

### On Page 7

**Question 1.** What was Franz expected to be prepared with for school that day?

**Answer** Franz was expected to be prepared with participles that day for M Hamel, their teacher was to question them on the topic. Franz had not learnt his lessons and feared scolding from him.

**Question 2.** What did Franz notice that was unusual about the school that day?

**Answer** When Franz reached school he noticed there was no great bustle which could otherwise be heard out in the street. No sound of opening or closing of desks could be heard. It seemed as quiet as Sundays. There were no lessons being repeated in unison nor the rapping of the ruler of the teacher on the table could be heard.

**Question 3.** What had been put up on the bulletin board?

**Answer** Since the last two years the bulletin board had news of lost battles, the drafts and the orders of commanding officer. That day a notice had been put up stating orders from Berlin to teach only German in the schools of Alsace-Lorraine.

### On Page 8

**Question 1.** What changes did the order from Berlin cause in the school that day?

**Answer** The order from Berlin caused many changes. That day the school was enveloped in an eerie silence. People realised the importance of learning their language and their patriotic feelings were aroused. Even people who had been busy earning their livelihood, come back to the school as a mark of respect for the teacher. Everybody had a streak of repentance and guilt in their heart.

**Question 2.** How did Franz's feelings about M Hamel and school change?

**Answer** Franz never liked going to school. His books seemed to be a nuisance to him. Learning was a burden so he had come unprepared to school that day. He wanted to be merry, never worrying about anything. He felt his teacher M Hamel; was a hard taskmaster and cranky.

On that historic day, however, his feelings about his teachers and the school changed. He was taken aback when told that it would be his last French lesson. He regretted having not learnt his lessons and being deprived of the

opportunity to learn his own mother tongue. Franz was ashamed of the fact that he did not know how to write. His books suddenly became 'old friends' whom he could not abandon. The very thought of Mr M Hamel going away made him forget about his ruler and cranky nature.

## Exercises

### Understanding the Text

**Question 1.** The people in this story suddenly realise how precious their language is to them. What shows you this? Why does this happen?

**Answer** When the order came from Berlin that henceforth only German will be taught in schools, people realised that it was the last day to learn their mother tongue. To show their affection for the language, many elderly people came to attend school, occupying the last benches which usually remained vacant. Franz regretted having not learnt the participles when M Hamel suddenly appraised them of the fact that they will become a laughing stock. It is their identity, the 'key' to their prison. The strongest evidence of how important is language comes from M Hamel's mesmerizing last lesson. This happened because of the French language being banned in Alsace and Lorraine.

**Question 2.** Franz thinks, "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?" What could this mean?

**Answer** In the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, when France was defeated and the districts of Alsace and Lorraine passed into the hands of the Prussians, orders came from Berlin that only German will be taught in schools. A new master would be coming to teach German. So it was the last lesson in French. Franz and all others present there felt sad and regretted putting off things at a later date. Just then the pigeons on the roof started cooing which made him think will the same orders come for animal kingdom too? Will they also have to forget their own language and learn German?

This points out to the mindset of man in general and conquerors specifically. Man has an intense desire to subjugate others. No wonder, he wants to enslave animals also. Just dominating and ruling over territory is not enough. Captors want to rule over minds as well. That's the reason why they impose their language on the oppressed. Linguistic chauvinism is the beginning of servitude.

In a nutshell, we can say that Franz's question is typical because it showcases the streak of authority and supremacy inherent in man. Given a chance, man might not even think twice before invading the sacred realm of Gods!

## Talking About the Text

**Question 1.** “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.” Explain.

**Answer** Subjugation of a country deprives people of their identity and freedom. One is subjected to restrictions in his/her own land. The worst part is when one has to abide by the diktats of the oppressor.

In these testing times it is only our mother tongue that binds us together. It becomes a weapon against the tyrants who have forcibly moved into a country. The teacher, M Hamel, is perfectly right when he says that it is a ‘key to their prison’. Language is a catalyst that initiates and sustains the freedom movement. So he reminds his countrymen of the importance of language; it is their identity and only when they fight for it will the future generations remember that they have been enslaved. It is only then they will carry the torch of freedom further.

India, Bangladesh, South Africa are some of the examples in history where the conquered people had their language taken away from them and another language imposed on themselves.

## Working with Words

**Question 1.** 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 origin of the following words

(i) Tycoon	(ii) tulip	(iii) logo	(iv) bandicoot
(v) barbecue	(vi) veranda	(vii) robot	(viii) Zero
(ix) ski	(x) trek		

Answer	Word	Origin
	(i) Tycoon	Japanese (taikun)
	(ii) Tulip	French (tulipe)
	(iii) Logo	German (logos)
	(iv) Bandicoot	Telugu (pandikokku)
	(v) Barbecue	Spanish (barbacoa)
	(vi) Veranda	Portuguese (veranda)

(vii) Robot	Czech (robota)
(viii) Zero	Arabic (cipher)
(ix) Ski	Norwegian
(x) Trek	Dutch (trekken)

**Question 2.** 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

- Answer**
- (a) (i) loud and clear
  - (b) (ii) are attached to their language
  - (c) (iii) early enough
  - (d) (iii) stood on the chair