

# LESSON - 1

## 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.



### BACKGROUND OF THE STORY

- The story 'The Last Lesson' is set in the days of the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871).
- The Prussian forces under Bismarck attacked and captured France. Prussia then consisted of what now are the nations of Germany, Poland and parts of Austria.
- The French districts of Alsace and Lorraine went into Prussian hands.
- The new Prussian rulers discontinued the teaching of French in the schools of these two districts.
- The French teachers were asked to leave.
- Read the story to find out what effect this had on life at school.

### THE REGION OF ALSACE

- Located in northeastern France on the border with Germany.
- For several centuries the region of Alsace has alternately been a German and a French territory.
- A long period of French rule ended in 1871 after the Franco-Prussian War.
- As the winner of the Franco-Prussian War, Germany annexed Alsace and the adjoining region of Lorraine.
- It is at this time that the events of "The Last Lesson" unfold.

### CHARACTERS AND PLACES

- Franz** : A school student (He is a sensitive and honest school boy who accepts his fault of ignoring his lessons.)
- M Hamel** : A teacher of French Language (He is a sincere and strict teacher of the French language who is passionately patriotic. He emerges as an epitome of an ideal teacher.)
- Old Houser** : An elderly villager who gathers with the children in M Hamel's classroom to hear last lesson
- Watcher** : A black smith
- M Hamel's Sister (an elderly woman)**
- Class** : Consists of some students and some elderly people of the village
- School** : An Elementary School in the District of Alsace, in France

### GIST OF THE LESSON

- Franz is afraid of going to school as he has not learnt participles.
- He wants to enjoy beauty of nature. The bright sunshine, the birds chirping in the woods, Prussian soldiers drilling but resisted.
- Bulletin board: all bad news, lost battles, the drafts and orders of the commanding officers: wondered what it could be now
- The changes he noticed in the school.
- Instead of noisy classrooms everything was as quiet as Sunday morning
- The teacher does not scold him and told him very kindly to go to his seat
- The teacher dressed in his Sunday best.

- Villagers occupying the last benches
- To pay tribute to M. Hamel for his 40 years of sincere service and also to express their solidarity with France.
- Hamel making the announcement that would be the last French lesson; realizes that, that was what was put up on the bulletin board.
- Franz realizes that he does not know his own mother tongue
- Regretted why he had not taken his lessons seriously.
- Also realizes the reason why teacher was dressed in his Sunday best and villagers sitting at the back.
- Hamel realizes that all three, the children, the parents and he himself are to be blamed for losing respect and regard for the mother tongue.
- Always keep the mother tongue close to your heart as it is the key to the prison of slavery.
- Atmosphere in class: teacher teaching sincerely and patiently, students and others studying with utmost sincerity.
- Franz wonders sarcastically if Prussians could force pigeons to coo in German.
- M. Hamel overcome with emotions could not speak and wrote on the black board "Long Live France".

**Answer the following questions in 30 – 40 Words.**

**1. What fear did little Franz have when he started for school in the morning?**

**Ans.** Franz was late for school that morning. He feared that the teacher would scold him. It was because the teacher was to ask questions on participles. But Franz did not know a word about participles.

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

**Ans.** Franz noticed that there was pin-drop silence in the school that day like Sunday morning. Usually there was a great noise in the school everyday which could be heard in the street. The opening and closing of desks, lessons repeated in unison, the rapping of the teacher's ruler could also be heard.

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

**Ans.** There was a notice on the bulletin board. It was written that only German language would be taught in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. The order had come from Berlin. It was also written that French language would not be taught in those schools.

**4. Why did Franz think of running away and spending the day out of doors?**

**Ans.** Franz had not learnt even a single word on participles. The teacher was to ask questions on it. He feared that the teacher would scold him. So he thought of running away and spending the day out of doors for enjoying so warm and so bright day, chirping of birds at the edge of the woods and the drilling Prussian soldiers.

**5. What did Franz see when he passed through the town-hall?**

**Ans.** Franz saw a crowd in front of the bulletin-board of the town hall. For the last two years, all bad news had come from there. He wondered what the matter could be there that day. However, he did not stop there and hurried by as fast as he could.

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

**Ans.** Franz was expected to be prepared with rules for the use of participles. It was because the teacher had to ask the questions on participles. But poor Franz had not learnt anything about them.

**7. What was the most surprising thing Franz saw in his classroom?**

**Ans.** Franz was quite surprise to see the villagers on the back benches. They were old Houser, the former postmaster and many others. Everybody looked sad. Old Hauser had brought an old primer. He was holding it open on his knees.

**8. What words of M. Hamel were a thunderclap to Franz?**

**Ans.** M. Hamel told the children that it would be his last lesson to his class. Orders had come from Berlin to teach only German in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. He said that the new teacher was coming the next day. These words came like a thunderclap to Franz.

**9. How did Franz feel when M. Hamel said that it was his last lesson at school?**

**Ans.** Franz was shocked. He cursed the Prussian rulers. He cursed himself also. He cursed himself for not learning his lesson. He used to call his book nuisance. But now he was sorry that he would never see M. Hamel again.

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

**Ans.** The order from Berlin had caused a great change in the school. It was all quiet. There were no noises. It was as quiet as Sunday morning. M. Hamel was wearing those clothes which he generally wore on Sunday, inspection and prize days. He said it would be his last lesson. The village people were sad and had come to thank M. Hamel for his forty years of faithful services.

**11. What usual noises could be heard in the street when the school began?**

**Ans.** One could hear the opening and closing of desks. Then there was the loud noise of lessons repeated in unison. The teacher's great ruler rapping on the table could also be heard.

**12. How was M. Hamel dressed on his last day in the school?**

**Ans.** Mr. Hamel was dressed in his best clothes. He was in his beautiful green coat and frilled shirt. He was wearing a little black silk cap. He never wore this dress except on inspection and prize days.

**13. How did Franz's feelings about M. Hamel and his school change?**

**Ans.** The very idea that M. Hamel was going away and he would never see him again, made him forget all about his ruler and that he was very cranky. He started liking and sympathizing with him. He also listened his teacher's teaching very carefully and understood each and every thing. The class became interesting for him.

**14. In the honour of The Last Lesson what were the changes on the teacher and the taught?**

**Ans.** M. Hamel had put on his fine Sunday clothes and even his old students – the old men of the village were sitting there on the usually empty back benches of the school room.

**15. Why were even the old men of the village present in the school room on the Last Lesson morning?**

**Ans.** The village people – Old Hauser, the former Mayor, the former post master and several others were present in the school room for thanking their master for forty years of his faithful service. Thus they were showing their respect for the country that was theirs no more. They were sorry, too, that they had not gone to school more.

**16. What did M. Hamel say about the French language?**

**Ans.** M. Hamel called French the most beautiful language of the world. He said that it was the clearest and most logical language. He wanted his people to keep it alive and never forget it.

**17. What happened when the Church-Clock struck twelve?**

**Ans.** There were sounds of the mid-day prayer (Angelus). At the same moment the sound of trumpets by Prussian soldiers was heard. They were returning from their drill. Mr. Hamel stood up to say something. But something choked him and he could say nothing. He took a big piece of chalk and wrote in big letters, "Long Live France!"

**18. What did M. Hamel – the teacher, teach in the Last Lesson?**

**Ans.** After questioning on participles, he talked of the French. He called it to be the most beautiful, clearest and logical language. After the grammar, they had a lesson in writing. He

heard every lesson to the last then they had a lesson in history before the babies chanted - ba, be, bi, bo, bu.

**19. How did Franz take The Last Lesson in him? How it occurred so?**

**Ans.** Franz was surprised to see that he understood The Last Lesson very well. All seemed to him very easy. The reason was that he never had listened the lesson so carefully, and the teacher had never explained to them everything with so much patience.

**20 How did 'The Last Lesson' came to an end"?**

**Ans.** The teacher M. Hamel could not speak. Something choked him. He wrote on the blackboard in very large letters:

"Vive La France!"

With a gesture to the students with his hand he hinted. "School is dismissed – You may go."

**Answer the following questions in 100 to 120 Words.**

**1. Describe the feelings, emotions and behaviours of M. Hamel on his Last day in school.**

**OR**

**Write a character sketch of M. Hamel.**

**Ans.** M. Hamel was a strict man of discipline. He was a devoted teacher of French language. He was a true patriot. He had boundless love for French language. He had been teaching the students for the last forty years. He was very serious that his students should learn their lessons. He was a true facilitator, guide and philosopher for his students. He was extra gentle and polite in his last class. He was quite upset and broken heart as he had to leave the school the next day. An order had come from Berlin to teach German only in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. He had worn his fine Sunday dress – the beautiful green coat, frilled shirt and the little black silk cap – all embroidered.

Like a friend and guide, he advised the innocent villagers to shift their priorities and pay more attention to learning at school. As a patient teacher he made Franz realize why he insisted on learning the lessons in time and not postponing the learning. He called upon them to shake off their delay and safeguard their language as it was key to their prison. We see him as a man of deep emotions when he proudly writes 'Viva La France' on the black board in the end. Thus M. Hamel is a true guide, an ideal teacher, philosopher and patriot to the core.

**2. What unusual things did Franz notice when he reached his school?**

**Ans.** The day was warm and bright. But there was unusual calm at school. Usually, when the school began there was a great hustle and bustle. The opening and closing of desk could be heard out in the street. Children repeated their lessons loudly in unison. The rapping of the teacher's rod on the table could also be heard. But that day it was all quiet. It surprised Franz. Through the window of the school room, Franz saw all his classmates already in their seats. M. Hamel was walking up and down with his terrible iron ruler under his arm. In a very kind and gentle tone the teacher told Franz to go to his seat quickly. After getting over his fear, Franz saw M. Hamel in his beautiful dress green coat, frilled shirt and the little black silk cap, all embroidered which he generally wore on school inspection day or prize distribution days. The most surprising thing for Franz was the presence of villagers on the back benches which remained always empty. They were sitting quietly. They were old Houser, the former mayor, the former postmaster with several others. They all were present there to pay tribute to M. Hamel for his forty years dedicated service.

**3. Justify the title of the Story "The Last Lesson".**

**Ans.** Alphonse Daudet has given a very suitable, balanced and the most appropriate title to this story. There are two main themes in the story – the first is a hurtful as well as tearful departure of M. Hamel from the school. The second theme highlights man's nature of postponing the lessons of life, quite forgetful to the fact that at any point of time circumstances may change and he may never be able to learn the very lesson he had been postponing to learn. Life may cut short his learning and it may unexpectedly prove to be his last lesson which happened with Franz.

The people of Alsace always felt that there was plenty of time to learn their lessons. So they did not give due importance to school. They preferred having their children work on farms and mills instead of having them learn their lessons. Even Franz always looked for opportunity to escape from school and was never serious about learning his lessons. Quite unexpectedly they receive orders from Berlin after defeat in the war that French will no longer be taught in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. Then they awaken to the course of safeguarding their language and attend the last lesson taught by M. Hamel, the French teacher. This story is aptly entitled as it evokes a consciousness in the reader that he must learn his lessons in time.

**4. Franz's attitude towards school as well as towards M. Hamel changes when he comes to know about the take over of his village by Prussians. Do you agree? Discuss with reference to 'The Last Lesson.'**

**Ans.** Franz's wants to enjoy outside as he has not learnt the lesson of participles. The teacher will test the students on that day. He thinks of spending the glorious day outdoors in more pleasurable manner but finally decides to go to school. On arriving at school he is met with an unusual silence and a strange sight. The Last benches, which were always empty, are occupied by village elders who look grim and solemn.

Franz is shocked to learn that this is to be the Last lesson on French. He suddenly realizes that he hardly knows the language, and that he can't write well enough in the language. He is overcome with intense regret and remorse for not attending school, for taking the French language granted, and for spending his time in trivial pursuits, when he should have been in school.

Franz also realized that suddenly he did understand the grammar that M. Hamel was explaining and wondered why he had not been attentive earlier. He was filled with unbidden and new found appreciation for his teacher and for his school.

**5. 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. Comment.**

**Ans.** The last lesson by Alphonse Daudet beautifully brings to light the brutality of war which makes man insensitive to human feelings and emotions.

Mother tongue helps a person to express his feelings and thoughts intimately. Conquerors try to subdue and control the people of the enslaved territory by enforcing many measures such as imposing their own language. The enslaved natives also become victims of a restrained and confined life with no hope of breathing freely in their own motherland. At such times of enslavement, it is their language, the mother tongue which keeps their identity alive. It is the key to their prison as the mother binds them together. It constantly reminds them of their enslavement and brings them together urging them to fight for the liberation of their motherland. M. Hamel, the French teacher reminds his countrymen to safeguard their language to liberate themselves and maintain their identity.

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

**Ans.** The Last Lesson by Alphonse Daudet highlights linguistic chauvinism. Acquisition of power over the Alsacians made the Prussians so domineering that they imposed even their language on them.

Franz means that their pride cannot make them dominate their minds and hearts. They had grown up using French as their language. Now taking it away from them would be unfair and unkind. This language was natural to them as cooing is to the pigeons. Robbing them of it would be not only difficult but next to impossible. It will be difficult to accept a language that will be imposed on them. It causes pain to undo a known language and learn to communicate in another. The purpose of language will be lost. Moreover, French bound them as brethren.

Franz mocks at the Berlin order which has imposed German language on the French people. Powerful Germans can defeat France, but they cannot compel pigeons to coo in German. In fact, no language can be imposed on the unwilling learners, especially a foreign language.

### **Value Based Questions**

**1. Franz's feelings about M. Hamel and school changed gradually by the end of the text, though he had a great disliking for both in the beginning of the story. It is said that first impression is the best impression. Is it true in context of 'The Last Lesson'? Definitely not. Write a small paragraph of about 100 to 120 words penning down your views on, 'A person can be best judged in his first appearance only'.**

**Ans.** A well-known dictum states that 'appearances are deceptive'. In fact, it is true that one cannot be judged in just one meeting. Actually, one or more meetings are not enough to judge a person's personality. Every person reacts differently on different situations at different times. So it is not a matter of single appearances to form a judgement about a person. It might be a prejudice. Now-a-days every person appears to be social and gentle. They want to be presentable in the society. No matter what their background is. One's clothes, gestures, habits, etc. do not define one's personality in just one appearance. Due time should be taken to form opinion about a person. Different situations reveal different aspects of one's personality. Sometimes a life remains short to know a person. But sometimes even a few seconds are enough to know one's real face. Hence, it is not a matter of first or last impression but the issue of time, needed to know one in one's right colours.

**2. While speaking his mouth choked and wrote, 'Vive La France' and finally by gesture he said: "School is dismissed – you may go." These lines show that M Hamel was greatly attached to his motherland, profession and mother tongue. In other words, one should be attached to his own land, cultures and customs. But today's Indians are drowned in the western colours. It shows that there is need to spread awareness about the feeling of patriotism and other related factors. Write a paragraph in about 100 to 120 words highlighting the issue.**

**Ans.** Patriotism-An Unmatched Spirit: Patriotism is defined as one's love for one's customs, culture, mother tongue, motherland and everything that is associated with one's motherland. One should be proud of what one's country has given to him. In Indian context, people have started adopting western culture. They are in the race of being 'Modern'. This is really surprising as well as pathetic. As an Indian, we own a rich and diversified culture which has attracted foreigners too. Many patriots have sacrificed their lives in the name of their country which has attracted foreigners too. Many patriots have a feeling that cannot be filled in the hearts of Indians but it should be arisen and inculcated among the future generation of the country. The students or the youth of the country need to be indianised. Adaption of different cultures is not bad. But forgetting our own culture for sake of other ones is not done. The need of the hour is to inculcate the moral values, virtues, love for humanity and motherland among the Indian youth. Patriotism is an undying and unmatched spirit that cannot be sacrificed for anything.