

THE LAST LESSON

By Alphonse Daudet

(Translated from the French by O. A. GILLESPIE)

I WAS terribly late for school that morning and the thought of Monsieur Hamel's scolding filled me with childish fear. He had warned us that he would question us on participles, and I didn't know the first word about them. For a moment I contemplated playing the wag for the day, which was beautifully warm and clear.

Blackbirds were whistling in the trees along the edge of the wood. I could hear them. In Rippert's meadow, behind the sawmill, Prussian soldiers were exercising. Everything about that day attracted me more than rules of grammar, but I overcame my personal feelings and started to run quickly towards the school-house.

As I passed the Town Hall I noticed a number of people gathered in front of the notice board. For two years all our bad news had come from that board—the news of lost battles, of demands and levies, of orders by the commandant, and I thought as I ran, "What on earth has happened now?"

As I crossed the market place, Wachter, the blacksmith, who was reading the notice in company with his assistant, cried out: "Don't hurry, old fellow, you'll get to school in plenty of time."

I thought he was making fun of me. Ordinarily, when the class began, one could hear, even from the street, the clatter of desks being opened and closed, lessons being repeated by the whole class, and our master's heavy ruler tapping on the table as he called out: "Silence, please."

I HAD hoped to reach my seat unseen under cover of such confusion, but instead of the noise everything was strangely quiet—just like a Sunday morning. Through the open window I saw that my comrades were already at their places. M. Hamel was walking up and down; the terrible iron ruler tucked under his arm. In the midst of this ominous calm I had to open the door and go in. You can imagine my fear; it brought a flush to my face. But nothing happened. M. Hamel was not angry. He just looked at me and said, very gently:

"Go quickly to your place, my little Frantz. We were going to begin without you."

Swinging my leg over the seat I sat down at my desk. Not until my courage had returned did I notice that our schoolmaster was wearing his best frock coat, pleated shirt, frilled jabot, and his embroidered skull cap of black silk which he wore only on days of inspection or for the distribution of prizes. There was something strange and solemn about the whole class. What surprised me most of all, however, was to see people of our village sitting in the seats at the back of the schoolroom. There was old Hauser, wearing his three-cornered hat; the old Mayor, the old postman, and many others, all as silent as the children themselves. Everybody seemed so sad. Hauser had brought a tattered spelling book which he held open on his knees. His thick glasses were lying across the open pages.

WHILE I wondered at all this, M. Hamel took his place at his desk and then said, in the same grave and tender voice with which he had greeted me:

"My children, this is the last time I will be able to teach you. An order has come from Berlin that in future German is to be the only language taught in Alsace and Lorraine. . . Your new master arrives to-morrow. This will be your last lesson in French. I want you to be specially attentive. . ."

Those words bewildered me. Oh, the wretches. So this was the notice everyone had been reading outside the Town Hall!

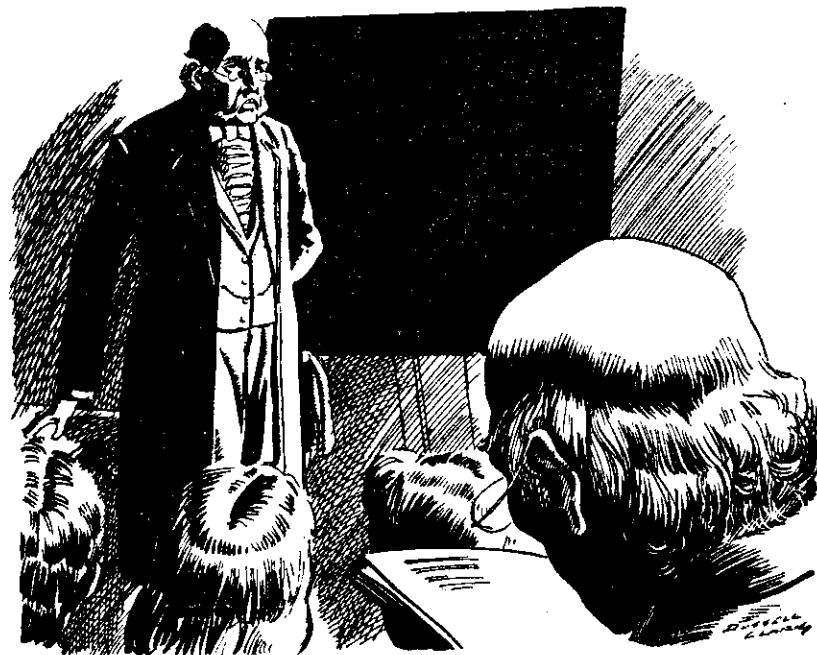
My last French lesson. Why, I scarcely knew how to read or write. Now I was angry with myself for the time I had wasted; for the classes I had missed when I went bird-nesting or skating on the Saar.

My books—my grammar, my beloved history—which only a short time ago had seemed so boring, so heavy to carry, were now like old friends from whom a parting would be painful. And M. Hamel, too; the idea that he was going away, that I would never see him again, made me forget all his reprimands and the smacks of his ruler.

The poor man! So this was why he was wearing his Sunday clothes! Now I understood why the old people of the village were sitting at the back of the schoolroom. The whole scene expressed regret that they had not come to school more often. And in a way, too, this seemed to be their method of paying humble tribute to our schoolmaster for his 40 years of unselfish service, as well as homage to the country which was being taken from them. . .

WHILE these thoughts ran through my head, I heard my name called. It was my turn to recite. What would I not have given to be able to run through that famous list of participles, clearly, without a fault? But I stuttered over the first words. I just stood there, balancing against my seat, heavy of

heart and never daring to raise my head. Then I heard M. Hamel speaking to me: "I shall not scold you, my little Frantz. You will be punished enough as it is. Every day we say to ourselves, 'Bah, I've plenty of time. I'll do it to-morrow.'"



. . . There was something strange and solemn about the whole class

Now you see what happens. Ah! That has been the greatest misfortune which has befallen Alsace—to put off until to-morrow what you might have done today. Now these new-comers will have the right to say, 'What, you pretend to be French and you can neither read nor write your own language?' But you are not the only ones to blame. We all have reason to reproach ourselves. Your parents have been at fault in not attending to your instruction. They would rather send you to work on farms or in mills because of the extra money you made. Even I am not free from blame. Have I not sent you to water my garden when you should have been studying? And when I wished to go fishing I did not hesitate to give you all a holiday. . ."

THUS M. Hamel led us from one subject to another. Then he began to speak to us about the French language, saying that it was the most beautiful in the world—the clearest, the most exacting. He urged us never to forget it because, he said, if a race of people became slaves, so long as they remembered and used their own tongue, it was as though they still held the key to their prison.

Then he took a grammar and read us our lesson. I was amazed how easily I

understood it. I don't think I have ever listened so intently; nor had M. Hamel been so patient with his explanations. Before he left us the poor man seemed as though he were trying to impart the whole of his knowledge in one lesson, so that we would be able to understand it.

Then we passed on to our writing lesson. M. Hamel had prepared, in his beautiful round hand, some new examples for us: France, Alsace, France, Alsace. Those words seemed to suggest tiny flags fluttering about our desks. You should have seen how each one of us applied himself to his task. Everything became so quiet that one heard only the scratching of pens on paper. No one, not even the infants who were learning

to trace their first pot-hooks, paid any attention to the cockchafers which flew into the schoolroom. Pigeons were gently cooing on the tiles of the roof and I thought to myself:

"And are they going to make you birds sing in German?"

OCCASIONALLY I looked up, to see M. Hamel standing motionless beside his desk. He seemed to be imprinting on his mind a complete picture of the objects around him so that he could carry it away with him.

Just think! For 40 years he had been there in the same place in this schoolroom. He had watched those seats and desks become polished by constant use; he had watched the walnut tree in the school yard grow bigger and bigger. He had planted the root of hops which now garlanded the windows, right up to the roof. What grief this departure must have caused the poor man. In the room above us his sister walked to and fro as she packed their trunks. They had been ordered to leave the following day—to leave their country forever. . .

But in spite of all this he continued the class to the end. Next we had our history lesson. The little tots then

(Continued on next page)