



**Learn English Through Stories**

**G Series**

**G52**

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# 1. The Last Lesson



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 silk cap, 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 anymore! 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 French language, saying that it was the most beautiful 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 rod at the top of our desks. You ought to have seen how everyone 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."

## 2. Summary

The narrator of the story is Franz – a student in the class of M. Hamel. One morning Franz was late for school. His teacher, M. Hamel, had told his class that he would be asking questions on participles on that day. Franz felt like playing hooky for a moment. But he resisted the urge and went to school. On his way to school, he saw people clustered in front of the bulletin board, and, as usual, he assumed that there was some bad news. It had been happening since Prussia annexed their district of Alsace.

The day felt unusual compared to regular days, as there was no commotion in the classroom. Everything was quiet, and instead of being scolded by M. Hamel, Franz was asked to go to his seat quickly. He noticed something odd about his teacher. M. Hamel was not wearing his usual clothes – he wore extravagant clothes only meant for school inspection or prize days. Another odd thing that day about the school was that most of the villagers, including the former mayor, former postmaster, etc., were sitting on the back benches and looked sad.

As the class began, the teacher, M. Hamel, announced that this was his last French lesson for his students as the Prussians had announced that French would no longer be taught in schools. Franz felt a sudden pang of remorse. He realised what the bad news on the bulletin board was: French was no longer to be taught in schools. Franz felt sorry about not attending his classes and not bothering about his lessons. He realised the villagers had come there to pay their respects to M. Hamel's forty years of service as a teacher. It was also about showing respect for their country, which was not theirs anymore.

When it was Franz's turn to recite, M. Hamel was patient. He did not scold Franz. He went on to discuss their district's problem – the assumption that they always had plenty of time. That is how the students lagged in their lessons – because they had taken their freedom and time for granted. Then M. Hamel blamed himself and Franz's parents for making him do chores rather than letting him focus on his studies. M. Hamel went on to talk about the beauty of French – their mother tongue – and how everyone should hold on to it even if it were not taught at schools. He explained that when people are enslaved, the only key to save their freedom is the common language that they share. He had brought new copies for the students and decorated the classroom for them.

Franz felt that everything his teacher was teaching was simple and easy to understand. He blamed himself for not listening to the lessons properly. Franz discovered that M. Hamel was supposed to leave the country. He realised how difficult it must have been for his teacher to leave a place he had stayed and served in for forty years. As the clock struck twelve and the Prussians blew their trumpets, the class ended, and M. Hamel said goodbye to his class by writing 'Vive La France' on the blackboard since he was too emotional to speak. He leaned his head against the wall and made a gesture with his hand – implying that the school was dismissed.

### **3. Questions and Answers**

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

**Answer:** That day Franz was expected to be prepared with participles because M. Hamel had said that he would question them on participles. Franz knew nothing about participles.

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

**Answer:** Usually, when school began, there was a great noise, which could be heard out in the street. But it was all very still that day. Everything was as quiet as Sunday morning. There was no opening or closing of desks. His classmates were already in their places. The teacher's great ruler instead of rapping on the table, was under M. Hamel's arm.

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

**Answer:** For the last two years all the bad news had come from the bulletin-board. An order had come from Berlin to teach only German in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. The Germans had put up this notice on the bulletin-board.

**Question 4. What changes did the order from Berlin cause in school that day?**

**Answer:** M. Hamel had put on his best dress—his beautiful green coat, his frilled shirt and the little black silk cap, all embroidered. The whole school seemed so strange and solemn. On the back benches that were always empty,



the elderly village people were sitting quietly like the kids. They all came to thank the teacher for his long service.

**Question 5. How did Franz's feelings about M. Hamel and school change?**

**Answer:** Franz came to know that it was the last lesson in French that M. Hamel would give them. From the next day they will be taught only German. Then he felt sorry for not learning his lessons properly. His books, which seemed a nuisance and a burden earlier were now old friends. His feelings about M. Hamel also changed. He forgot all about his ruler and how bad-tempered he was.

**Question 6. The people - in this story suddenly realise how precious their language is to them. What shows you this? Why does this happen?**

**Answer:** M. Hamel told the students and villagers that henceforth only German would be taught in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. Those who called themselves Frenchmen would neither be able to speak nor write it. He praised French as the most beautiful, the clearest and most logical language in the world. He said that for the enslaved people, their language was the key to their prison. Then the people realised how precious their language was to them. This shows people's love for their own culture, traditions and country. Pride in one's language reflects pride in the motherland.

**Question 7. Franz thinks, "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?" What could this mean?**

**Answer:** This comment of Franz shows a Frenchman's typical reaction to the imposition of learning German, the language of the conquerors. Being deprived of the learning of mother tongue would mean cutting off all bonds with the motherland. Teaching the pigeons to sing in German indicates how far the Germans would go in their attempts of linguistic prejudice.

**Question 8. "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." 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?**

**Answer:** Mother tongue helps a person to express his feelings and thoughts most clearly and fully. Conquerors try to subdue and control the people of the enslaved territory by enforcing many measures such as use of force to crush dissent and imposing their own language on them.

From time immemorial the victorious nations have imposed their own language on the conquered people and taken away their own language from them. The Romans conquered many parts of Europe and replaced the local languages by their own language— Latin. Later on Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and French developed from Latin. The Muslim invaders imposed Arabic and Persian in the countries of Asia overpowered by them. In many Arab countries the local religion and language have disappeared. In India, a new language Urdu developed from the mixture of Persian and Hindi. In the state Punjab, the students were taught in the Urdu medium, and the Gurmukhi alpha beta was not used.

**Question 9. "What a thunderclap these words were to me!" (Franz). What were those words and what was their effect on Franz?**

**Answer.** Franz was thunderstruck when Mr. Hamel announced that he was there to teach his last lesson of French that day. They had received orders from Berlin that teaching French was being barred. Franz felt very sorry for not learning his French lessons when there was still time. He felt very sad.

**Question 10. How were the parents and M. Hamel responsible for the children's neglect of the French language?**

**Answer.** M. Hamel feels that the parents and he himself are responsible for the children's neglect of the French language. Parents preferred to have their children work on their farms or in the mills. Even Hamel had sent the children on petty errands for his convenience, thus, making them miss their lessons.

**Question 11. Why did Franz not want to go school that day?**

**Answer.** Franz did not want to go to school that day because the weather was very tempting. The bright day, chirping of birds, woods and fields, free environment outside along with the drilling by Prussian soldiers all restricted him. Moreover, he did not prepare his lesson and feared Mr. M. Hamel's scolding on that day.

**Question 12. Why was Franz not scolded for reaching the school late that day?**

**Answer.** Mr. H. Hamel did not scold Franz. He only said that it is not good to put off learning. He blamed Franz parents for not caring towards his studies. He blamed himself also and spoke very kindly to him to sit in his place quickly.

**Question 13. What did Franz wonder about when he entered the class that day?**

**Answer.** Franz had a bundle of surprises; the village people were sitting quietly on the back benches. Mr. Hamel did not get angry with Franz, rather he requested him very kindly, to go to his place and sit there. Mr. Hamel was dressed in his best clothes. Everybody in class looked very sad.

### 3. Grammar Page

Unit  
52

Question tags (**do you?** **isn't it?** etc.)

**A** Study these examples:



**Have you?** and **wasn't it?** are *question tags*. These are mini-questions that you can put on the end of a sentence.

In question tags, we use an auxiliary verb (**have/was/will** etc.).

We use **do/does/did** for the present and past simple (see Unit 51):

- ☐ 'Karen plays the piano, **doesn't** she?' 'Well, yes, but not very well.'

**B** Normally we use a *negative* question tag after a *positive* sentence:

... and a *positive* question tag after a *negative* sentence:

positive sentence + negative tag

Kate <b>will</b> be here soon,	<b>won't she?</b>
There <b>was</b> a lot of traffic,	<b>wasn't there?</b>
Joe <b>should</b> pass the exam,	<b>shouldn't he?</b>

negative sentence + positive tag  
 Kate **won't** be late, **will she?**  
 They **don't** like us, **do they?**  
 You **haven't** eaten yet, **have you?**

Notice the meaning of **yes** and **no** in answer to a negative sentence:

- ☐ 'You're **not** going out this morning, **are you**?' { 'Yes.' (= Yes, I am going out)  
'No.' (= No, I am not going out)

**C** The meaning of a question tag depends on how you say it. If your voice goes *down*, you are not really asking a question. You expect the listener to agree with you:

- ☐ 'It's a nice day, **isn't it?**' 'Yes, beautiful.'
- ☐ 'Paul doesn't look well today, **does he?**' 'No, he looks very tired.'
- ☐ 'Lisa's very funny. She's got a great sense of humour, **hasn't she?**' 'Yes, she has.'

But if the voice goes *up*, it is a real question:

- ☐ 'You haven't seen Kate today, **have you?**' 'No, I haven't.'  
(= Have you seen Kate today?)

You can use a *negative sentence + positive tag* to ask for things or information, or to ask somebody to do something. The voice goes *up* at the end of the tag:

- ☐ 'You couldn't do me a favour, **could you?**' 'It depends what it is.'

After **Let's ... (= Let us)** the question tag is **shall we:**

- ☐ **Let's** go for a walk, **shall we?** (the voice goes *up*)

After **Don't** ..., the question tag is **will you**:

- ☐ **Don't be late, will you?** (the voice goes *down*)

After **I'm ...**, the negative question tag is **aren't I?** (= am I not?):

- ☐ 'I'm right, **aren't** I?' 'Yes, you are.'