



Alphonse Daude
The Child's World, fifth grade Reader - 1917

THAT morning I was very late in going to school, and I feared a sound scolding, especially as M. Hamel had told us that he would question us on participles, about which I knew not the first word. For a second the idea came to me to 'play hookey' and go out into the country.

The day was so warm, so clear. The blackbirds whistled on the edge of the wood, and in the green meadow, behind the sawmill, the Prussians were drilling. All this tempted me more than the rule of participles, but I had the strength to resist and ran on swiftly toward school.

Passing the town-hall, I saw a crowd in front of the wire-screened bulletin-board. For two years nothing but bad news had come to us from it — battles lost, requisitions, orders of the commandant.

Without stopping, I thought, "What is it this time?"

As I ran by the place, the blacksmith, who was there with his apprentice reading the bulletin, cried to me, "You needn't be in such a hurry, boy. You will get to your school soon enough."

I thought he was making fun of me, and, running on, I arrived in M. Hamel's little yard all out of breath.

Usually when school began there was a great noise—~which could be heard even in the street—of desks opened and closed, of lessons repeated in a loud voice all together, with ears stopped, the better to understand, and of the master's great ruler tapping the desk, "Silence!" I counted on that noise to help me gain my bench without being seen, but to-day everything was as quiet as Sunday.

Through the window I could see my school-mates ranged in their places and M. Hamel, who passed and repassed with that terrible iron ruler under his arm. I had to open the door and enter in the midst of that silence.

You may think that I was flushed and scared. 'Well, no. M. Hamel looked at me without anger and said very gently, "Take your place at once, little Frantz; we were about to begin without you."

I hopped over a bench and sat down at once at my desk. Then only, a little recovered from my fright, I noticed that our teacher had put on his fine, green frock-coat, his frilled shirt and his cap of embroidered black silk, the attire he wore only on inspection days or at prize-givings. Besides, the whole school had about it something out of the way and solemn.

But what surprised me most was to see, on the vacant benches at one end of the room, the people of the village seated and silent like ourselves — old Hauser with his cocked-hat, the former mayor, the old postman and many others. Everybody seemed sad, and old Hauser had brought an ancient primer, worn at the edges, which he held open on his knees, with his great spectacles placed across the pages.

In the midst of my astonishment, M. Hamel arose at his desk and in the same gentle and grave voice with which he had greeted me, said to us, "My children, this is the last time that I shall hold the school. The order has come from Berlin that only German shall be taught now in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. The new teacher arrives to-morrow. To-day is your last lesson in French. I ask you to pay attention."

These words overwhelmed me. Ah! that was the news posted on the town hall. My last lesson in French! And I—I could scarcely write. I had never learned. And I must stop here!

How I reproached myself for the time lost, the classes cut, in order to run after bird-nests and go skating on the river. My school-books, which I had always found so tiresome, SO heavy to carry — my grammar, my history — now seemed to me old friends that I felt sorry to have go. Like M. Hamel. The thought that he was about to go — that I should never see him again—made me forget the punishments he had inflicted on me.

Poor man! It was in honor of his last class that he had put on his Sunday clothes, and now I understood why the old people of the village were seated at the end of the room. It was to show that they regretted they had not come oftener to the school.

It was a way of thanking our master of forty years for his faithful service and of paying their respects to the native land that was going away from them.

I was plunged in these reflections when I heard my name called; it was my time to recite. What would I have given then for the power to speak out that famous rule of participles, loudly, clearly, without a mistake! But I became mixed up with the first words, and I remained standing, balancing myself against the bench, my heart heavy, without daring to raise my head.

I heard M. Hamel say, "I will not scold you, little Frantz; you will be punished enough. Every one says, 'Bah! I have plenty of time; I will learn to morrow!' And see what happens! Ah! it is the great weakness of our Alsace, always to put off learning until to-

morrow. Now these people — the Prussians — have the right to say to us, 'What! You pretend to be French and you cannot speak or write your language?' In this matter, my poor Frantz, it is not you alone who is to blame. We all have to bear our share of it. "Your parents have not paid sufficient attention to your schooling. They cared more about sending you to work on the farm or in the factory, in order to make a little bit more. And I — have I nothing with which to reproach myself? Have I not often sent you to water my garden instead of to work?"

And when I felt like going trout-fishing, have I hesitated to dismiss you?"

Then, going from one thing to another, M. Hamel came to speak to us of the French tongue, saying that it was the most beautiful language of earth, the clearest, the strongest — that it was necessary for us to cherish it and never forget it, because when a people became enslaved, so long as they kept their language they held the key to the prison. Taking a grammar, he read us the lesson. I was astonished to see how well I understood. All that he read seemed to me easy — easy! I believe that I never listened so, attentively, and that never before had he explained so patiently. It seemed to me as if the poor man before going away wished to give us all his knowledge, cramming it into our heads at one stroke.

The lesson ended, we passed to writing. M. Hamel had prepared for us writing models, entirely new, on which he had written in a beautiful round hand, "France, Alsace, France, Alsace." It was as if little flags floated in the room, hung from the rods on our desks. How each one applied himself, and what a silence! Nothing was heard but the scratching of pens on paper.

June-bugs flew in, but nobody heeded them; all the children applied themselves to making the strokes, with a heart, with a conscience — as if that were something French. On the roof of the school-house pigeons cooed softly, and hearing them, I said to myself, "Will they also be obliged to sing in German?"

From time to time as I raised my eyes from the page, I saw M. Hamel motionless in his chair — looking at the objects around him as if he wished to carry away in his eye all his little school-room. Think! For forty years he had been in that place, with the yard opposite and the school just the same. Only the benches and desks were worn and polished by use; the walnut-trees in the yard had grown, and the hop-vine he had planted himself engirdled the windows up to the roof. What a heart-ache it meant for the old man to leave these things and to hear his sister moving to and fro in the room below fastening the trunks! For the next day they were going to leave the country forever.

All the same, he had the courage to hold school through to the end. After the writing we had the history lesson; then the small children said together the Ba,-Be, Bi, Bo, Bu. Yonder at the end of the room, Old Hauser had put on his spectacles and held his primer in both hands; he spelled the letters with them. You could see that he applied himself, too. His voice trembled with emotion, and it was so funny to hear him that we felt like laughing and crying both. Ah! I shall ever remember that last class.

Suddenly the clock in the church-tower sounded noon, then the Angelus. At the same moment the bugles of the Prussians, who were returning from drill, burst out under the windows. M. Hamel raised himself, pale as death, in his chair. Never had he seemed so tall. "My friends," he said, "I — " . . . but he choked; he could not finish the sentence.

He turned toward the blackboard, took a piece of chalk, and bearing on it with all his might, wrote in letters as large as he could make, "Vive la France!"

Then he rested there, his head leaning against the wall; and not speaking, with his hand he motioned to us, "It is over . . . Go."