

A Little Country Girl

by Kate Chopin



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Level 3

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Chapter One - The Day the Circus Came

The day was already very hot when Ninette started her work in the yard. The sun was high in the sky, and the air did not move. She was washing a tin milk pail with sand and strong soap. Her hands worked fast, but her heart felt slow and heavy.

The long wooden table stood under the mulberry tree. On it were pots, pans, and tin pails. This was the place where food was prepared every day. Chickens were cut here. Vegetables were washed here. Nothing ever changed in this yard.

But today was different. Today, the circus had come to the village.

Ninette did not talk about the circus to her grandfather or grandmother. There was no reason to speak. They were old and strict people. They did not believe in fun. They did not understand why music, animals, and laughter were important to young hearts.

Asking them would change nothing.

Her face was red from the heat and from anger. Her black hair was short and uneven. It kept falling into her eyes, and she pushed it back again and again. She was barefoot. Her simple skirt reached just above her ankles.

She worked in silence. But inside her head, thoughts were running fast. Everyone is going, she thought. Everyone except me.

She heard someone stop near the table. It was Suzan's daughter. People called her Black-Gal. She leaned against the table and looked at Ninette with a small smile.

"You ain't going to the circus?" she asked.

Ninette put the bread pan down hard on the table.

"No."

Black-Gal smiled wider. "We all's going. Mammy, Pap, Joe. Everybody."

Ninette did not answer at once. Her hands stopped moving.

"Where you get the money?" she asked.

Black-Gal laughed. "Mr. Ben give Mammy a dollar. Joe got money from picking cotton. Pap sold an old plow. We all's going."

She spoke faster now, full of pride.

“Joe saw the circus pass by the road. A big elephant. Wild animals in cages. Horses and dogs. Ladies in red skirts with gold and diamonds.”

Each word hurt Ninette. Black-Gal looked at her again. “Why you don’t ask your grandma? Or your grandpa?”

Ninette felt her anger rise.

“That’s my business,” she said. “You go home and do your work.”

“I ain’t got no work,” Black-Gal answered. “Only ironing my pink dress for the circus.”

She walked away slowly, swinging her skirt.

As soon as she was gone, Ninette’s eyes filled with tears. They fell onto the tin pail she was holding. She wiped them away, but more came. Inside her chest, something dark grew.

She felt angry. She felt small. She felt left behind.

“I hope it rains,” she whispered. “I hope it rains hard.”

She imagined people running. Dresses wet. Music stopping.

“I hope they all get wet,” she said softly.

She did not know that her grandmother was near.

“What did you say, Ninette?” the old woman asked.

“I said I hope it rains,” Ninette answered quickly.

Her grandmother turned toward her.

“You are a bad girl,” she said. “Your grandfather’s cotton is ready. Rain would destroy it. People should work, not run after foolish fun.”

Ninette looked down. She said nothing. But deep inside, she still believed in miracles. If she could go to the circus, it would be a miracle.

Quietly, without telling anyone, she began to prepare. She checked her clean dress in the cupboard. She hid her stockings under the pillow. She washed her face until it burned. She tied her short hair back with a green ribbon.

After noon, the world outside changed.

The fields became empty. People walked along the road in groups. Wagons passed, full of children. Old carts and horses moved toward the village.

Everyone was going.

Her grandfather stayed inside, angry and silent. Her grandmother stood on the gallery and watched, even though she pretended not to care.

Ninette shelled peas at the table. Her hands worked, but her heart was praying.

Then a big wagon stopped at the gate. A man climbed down. It was Jules Perrault.

“What is this?” he said loudly. “Ninette not going to the circus?”

Her grandmother stood stiff and quiet.

“She is going,” Mr. Perrault said firmly. “She will go with us.”

Ninette’s heart jumped. She looked at her grandmother.

The old woman said nothing. That silence was enough. Ninette ran into the house.

And when she came out again, she saw something she did not believe. Her grandfather was holding his purse.

Chapter Two - A Miracle on the Road

When Ninette came out of the house, her heart was beating fast. She almost stopped breathing. There, near the steps, stood her grandfather. In his hand was his old brown purse. He was pulling it out slowly, as if it were very heavy.

Jules Perrault stood next to him. He was speaking in a calm voice. Ninette could not hear the words, but she understood the meaning. Mr. Perrault was asking, not fighting. He was explaining, not ordering.

At last, her grandfather opened the purse. He took out the money and gave it to Mr. Perrault. He did not look at Ninette.

“Bring her home before dark,” he said.

That was all. But for Ninette, it was everything.

Her eyes filled with tears. She wanted to run forward and thank him, but she did not move. In her grandparents’ house, feelings were kept inside.

She turned to her grandmother. The old woman looked serious, but her voice was softer now.

“Go,” she said. “And behave well.”

Ninette nodded quickly.

She climbed into the big farm wagon with the Perrault family. Children were sitting everywhere. There were baskets, bags, and loud voices. The wagon felt alive.

Madame Perrault placed her baby into Ninette’s arms.

“Hold him,” she said kindly.

Ninette held the baby close. His body was warm. His small fingers moved, opening and closing. Holding him made her feel calm and important at the same time.

The wagon began to move.

The road was rough. The wheels jumped over stones and holes. Dust rose into the air and covered their clothes. But Ninette did not care. Each shake of the wagon made her smile.

This is real, she thought. This is really happening.

They passed people walking along the road. Families laughed and talked. Some carried food. Some sang songs. Everyone was moving in the same direction.

Then Ninette saw Black-Gal.

She was walking with her family, her feet white with dust. Her pink dress moved proudly as she walked. She held a green parasol above her head.

Ninette did not wave.

She sat high in the wagon, holding the baby. The wagon passed them and left a cloud of dust behind. For once, Ninette felt taller than Black-Gal.

Soon, they reached the open land near the village.

Colorful tents stood in the distance. Flags moved in the air. Music floated toward them. It was louder and brighter than anything Ninette had ever seen.

Her mouth opened in wonder. The circus was real.

She smelled many things at once—animals, dust, sweet drinks, and food. People shouted and laughed. Children ran everywhere.

The baby in her arms moved and made small sounds. His eyes were wide.

“Oh, bébé,” Ninette whispered. “Look.”

They walked past a merry-go-round. Wooden horses went up and down as music played. Children laughed as they rode.

Ninette stopped and watched. If only I had more money, she thought. I would ride one of those horses.

There were small tents with pictures painted on cloth. One showed a very large woman. Another showed a strange animal from far away. Ninette looked quickly and then looked away. She felt curious, but also afraid.

Jules Perrault led them into the biggest tent.

Inside, it was dark and cool. The floor was covered with sawdust. The smell of animals filled the air.

Ninette breathed deeply.

She saw the elephant at once. It was enormous. A chain was around its leg. It moved slowly and reached out its trunk.

Ninette felt both wonder and sadness.

The people sat down on wooden benches. Ninette's feet did not touch the ground. She kept holding the baby. Madame Perrault offered to take him, but Ninette shook her head.

She wanted to share everything with him. Then the music grew louder.

Horses ran into the ring. Men and women rode them in bright clothes. The crowd clapped.

And then the clown appeared.

His face was white. His clothes were too big. He fell down, stood up, and fell again. He made funny sounds and silly faces.

Ninette laughed so hard that her sides hurt.

“Oh, bébé,” she said, holding the baby tighter. “This is wonderful!”

For a moment, there was no work, no rules, no anger. Only joy.

Ninette did not see the sky grow dark.

Chapter Three - When the Storm Came

The music was loud inside the tent. People were laughing and clapping. Ninette sat very still on the wooden bench. She was holding the baby close to her chest. Her arms were tired, but she did not want to let him go.

She felt warm and happy. For a moment, she believed nothing bad could happen. But the air slowly began to change.

It felt heavy. It was harder to breathe. The animals made low, strange sounds in their cages. Some people stopped laughing and looked around.

Then there was a deep noise. It came from far away.

Boom.

Ninette felt it more than she heard it. People turned their heads.

“What was that?” someone asked.

Before anyone could answer, a bright light flashed above the tent. A second later, a loud sound followed. Thunder crashed so hard that the ground shook.

Children screamed. The horses moved nervously. The elephant lifted its trunk and made a loud cry. The man in the middle of the ring tried to smile.

“Hip-la!” he shouted. “Hip-la!”

For a few seconds, the show continued. The clown stood on his head. People laughed again, but the sound was weak and unsure.

Then the wind came.

It hit the tent suddenly and strongly. The canvas shook. The tall pole in the middle began to move from side to side.

Crack!

There was a terrible sound. The pole broke. The tent fell. Everything happened at once.

Benches fell over. People pushed and shouted. Animals cried loudly. Dust filled the air, and Ninette could not see anything.

She felt herself fall forward. Someone stepped on her foot. Something hit her shoulder. She fell to the ground, but she did not let go of the baby.

The baby screamed. That sound woke something strong inside Ninette.

She rolled onto her side and pulled the baby close. She crawled on her knees and hands. Broken wood lay everywhere. Pieces of the tent hung down like heavy cloth walls.

Her knees hurt. Her dress tore. But she kept moving. At last, she saw light.

She pushed through a hole in the canvas and fell onto the ground outside. Rain hit her face and arms at once. It was raining very hard.

Water ran down her hair and clothes. Mud covered her knees. She sat on the ground and held the baby tightly.

Around her, the world was full of noise.

Animals screamed in fear. Men shouted names. Women cried. Children screamed for their parents.

Lightning lit the sky again and again. Ninette was shaking. She remembered her words.

“I hope it rains.”

Fear filled her heart.

This is my fault, she thought. I asked for this. She dropped to her knees in the mud.

“Oh God,” she whispered. “Please keep the baby safe. Please help everyone.”

She did not pray for the circus. She prayed for people. She prayed for animals. She prayed to go home.

She stayed there, wet and shaking, while the baby cried loudly in her arms. Then she heard a voice calling her name.

“Ninette! Ninette!”

It was Jules Perrault.

He ran toward her and pulled the heavy cloth away. When he saw her, his face changed.

“Thank God,” he said. “You are alive.”

He took the baby and wrapped him in his coat. Then he helped Ninette stand up. Her legs were weak. She felt cold all over.

People slowly gathered their families. Some were hurt. Some were crying. Some just stood and stared at the broken tent.

The circus was over.

When they finally started for home, the sky was dark. The rain was softer now, but Ninette did not speak.

That night, she dreamed of falling tents and loud thunder. And when she woke up, fear was still inside her.

Chapter Four - Learning the Truth

After the storm, Ninette was very quiet.

She did her work every day, just like before. She washed dishes. She peeled vegetables. She helped in the yard. But something inside her had changed. She did not sing. She did not smile. Often, her eyes filled with tears, and she did not know why.

At night, she slept badly. She dreamed of loud thunder and falling cloth. Sometimes she woke up afraid and cold.

Her grandmother watched her closely. After several days, the old woman spoke.

“This cannot go on,” she said. “Tell me what is wrong.”

Ninette tried to answer, but her voice shook. At last, she told the truth.

She said she had wished for rain. She said she believed the storm came because of her anger. She believed she had caused pain and fear to many people.

“It is my fault,” she cried. “I asked for the rain.”

Her grandmother listened carefully. She did not shout. She did not blame the child. But she felt worried. This was not simple sadness. It was fear living inside a young heart.

The next day, her grandmother went to see the priest.

She asked him to speak to Ninette.

That afternoon, Ninette was sitting under the mulberry tree, peeling potatoes, when the priest arrived. He was a small man with a friendly face. He walked in a funny way and bowed low, as if greeting a queen.

“I am happy to meet the great weather-maker,” he said with a smile.

“The girl who calls the rain and the wind!”

Ninette looked at him in surprise.

“What weather will you give us today?” he asked lightly.

For a moment, Ninette almost smiled.

Then the priest became serious. He stood straight and looked at her kindly.

“Look at me, Ninette,” he said. “You are a child. You cannot control the sky. Rain comes when it comes. Storms happen. They do not listen to wishes.”

Ninette listened carefully.

He spoke about fear. He said fear can grow when we believe wrong things. He said thoughts can hurt us, even when they are not true.

Slowly, Ninette felt something change inside her. She still felt ashamed. But she also felt lighter. That evening, Jules Perrault came to the house. He spoke quietly to the grandparents.

“This child needs other children,” he said. “She works too much and laughs too little. She needs friends and happy days.”

His words stayed in their minds. The next day, they made a decision.

Ninette was allowed to go to a birthday party at the Perraults’ house.

When she heard this, her heart felt warm. She smiled carefully, as if she were afraid the happiness might disappear.

Her grandfather cleared his throat.

“If it is needed,” he said slowly, “I will help pay for a proper dress.”

He did not look at her. But Ninette understood. That night, she lay in bed and thought about everything.

She remembered the circus. She remembered her wish. She remembered the storm. Now she understood something important.

Wishing harm did not give her power. It only brought fear. She was still a child.

But she was learning. And that was the beginning of growing up.

— THE END —

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