

Li'l 'Stracted

By

ELIZABETH CARRINGTON EGGLESTON

*Li'l 'Stracted danced in the clearing in the pines;
Sunlight stitched with the needles of the pines;
There by the cabin
In the brush-swept clearing,
'Stracted's stick horse
Kept on a'rearing.*

*"Come in, Li'l 'Stracted,
Time to eat,
Greens and shote and hot corn bread;
If yo' horse is a'kicking
Hit him in the head;
Come on and eat,
Li'l 'Stracted."*

"Can my horse have some dinner?"

*"Sho' he can.
Put him in the stable
Right by your han'.
Set down now
And bow your head.
The Lawd be blessed
For good corn bread;
The Lawd be blessed
For good fat meat;
And turnip greens
Is good to eat;
Bless de Lawd
For his chillun."*

'Stracted danced in the clearing in the pines —
Sunlight stitched a yellow sheet —
He shuffle-danced, and his little bronze feet
Made a pattern in the clearing
With dust and sunlight and sharp blue shade.

His one-eyed hound pup
Romped and played,
And licked 'Stracted's face
And scratched for fleas,
Till they both went to sleep
By the scrub pine trees
In the clearing.

The District Nurse got out of her car.
"I'm here at last,
And there you are."
The sunlight shook,
And the pattern changed;
A wind came creeping
Out of the trees.
Over in the woods
The thunder rumbled.
"There is going to be a storm,
And the creek is high."
She knocked at the door,
And the thunder grumbled
Low in the sky.
The hound pup whined,
And 'Stracted stirred;
His Mammy came
As soon as she heard.
"Come in Mistis,
And take a cheer."
"You're the woman

That's living here?"
"Yes'm, I'm Dilsey.
Wake up 'Stracted!
Get the bucket
And run to the spring.
The lady's thirsty
With journeying."

"So you are the mother
Of the idiot child?"
The thunder rolled
Up the sky awhile;
The lightning flashed
Where the sun had shone.
"'Stracted?
He ain't no idjut chile;
He's jest a little 'stracted —
Likin' to dance —
There ain't no harm in 'Stracted."
The clouds were purple
And the black pines hissed
With a swish of branches.
"I can't stay.
The storm is here
And the creek's to cross.
I'll come tomorrow
And take him away."

Dimly Dilsey knew her loss
And was sick with fear.
"Don't take Li'l 'Stracted,
Don't take my chile!"
"The child's an idiot.
The County Board
Will put him in th' Asylum."

She climbed in her Ford.
"You must have him ready
Well before dark."
The one-eyed pup began to bark,
And 'Stracted ran
And held up the gourd
In his little black hand;
But the Nurse chugged off
In her shiny Ford.

The rain rushed over like a silver hound,
'Stracted danced to its singing beat:
He waved his hands —
And his little black feet
Stitched a pattern upon the silver.
"Come here 'Stracted!
Yo sho' is sweet."
'Stracted shuffle-danced there in the rain;
Pine trees black
And the wind turned cold.

Close to the chimney, shriveled and old,
'Stracted's Granny with her hands all shaking;
"I couldn't hear what the Nuss-woman say
For the fuss the thunder was making."
"Said she's gonna take Li'l 'Stracted away."
"Take him away? He can't go to school."
"She'll take him to th' Asylum —
Says 'Stracted's a fool.
S'pose they's mean to Li'l 'Stracted."
Dilsey threw her apron up over her head,
Mourned like she would
If 'Stracted was dead.
"S'pose they's mean to 'Stracted!"

*They sat by the fire
While it rained outside;
And 'Stracted's Mammy cried and cried;
"They might be mean to 'Stracted;
Who'll be good to Li'l 'Stracted?"*
*Shriveled old Granny
Smoked her corn-cob pipe,
Knocked out the ashes
In her hard old palm;
"Nobody's gonna do 'Stracted any harm,
Hush your fuss 'bout 'Stracted."*
*Granny by the chimney in her rocking chair,
Looked in the fire and began to stare —
"Wonder has I forgot the spell,
It used to conjur critters mighty well."*
*Rocked, and hummed a little tune,
"Tonight's the night of the Harvest Moon."*
*She picked up a coal and lit her pipe;
"Don't cry 'bout 'Stracted,
'Stracted's ripe.
Don't you cry 'bout 'Stracted."*

*But Dilsey didn't listen, and wept and wept;
And 'Stracted stretched by the fire and slept.
The rain stopped beating and the clouds blew away,
The moon came up as bright as day.
The old woman rocked to her little tune:
"Tonight's the night of the Harvest Moon,
Critters is out when the moon is high.
Hush up Dilsey, don't you cry.
Don't you cry 'bout 'Stracted."*

*'Stracted danced in the clearing in the pines:
Moonlight stitched a silver sheet;
'Stracted danced, and his little shirt tail*

*Caught the wind like a shining sail,
And his little black hands
And his little black feet
Made patterns upon the silver.
Shadows as sharp as a corn knife blade,
Thrust through the clearing where 'Stracted played
With his one-eyed pup and tobacco-stick horse.*

*His old black Granny hid in the shade
By the cabin door:
The coal in her pipe
Made an amber star.
Crone in the shadows swayed and swayed,
Low as the wind
Began to croon,
"Come out critters
This your moon,
Here's a little critter
Meant for you."*

*First came a hare
As soft as dew,
Hopped in the clearing
Where 'Stracted danced,
Sat on his haunches
And listened too.
Then came a ring-tailed
Silver coon,
Slipped through the clearing
And began to dance;
A rat-tailed possum
Came loping up,
Fell in behind
The one-eyed pup;
A sly grey fox,*

*A big black bear,
All in the clearing
Dancing there.*

*Dancing there in the clearing in the pines,
Moonlight stitched their silver coats;
Hare and possum,
Coon and fox,
One-eyed pup
And big black bear,
Dancing, dancing in the moonlight there;
'Strated shuffling, with his little shirt tail
Full in the wind like a silver sail.*

*Old black Granny
Hid in the shade
Strange dark signs
With her fingers made.
Swayed, and chanted
A forest tune;
Made dark signs
And pulled on her pipe.
"Take Li'l 'Strated —
'Strated's ripe."*

*Nobody knew what became of 'Strated.
The District Nurse got mad and acted
Like Dilsey knew what became of him.
The Sheriff took his hounds and searched:
'Strated wasn't in the pines,
And he wasn't in the clearing,
He wasn't in the creek
As they were fearing.
They searched the cabin inside out
But 'Strated was gone, without a doubt.*

*They searched through gullies and brier patches;
But all they got was mud and scratches.*

*'Stracted wasn't there;
Couldn't be found;
And neither could his
One-eyed yellow hound;
And there was another funny loss,
Even 'Stracted's tobacco-stick horse
Wasn't anywhere around.
Strange the way his Granny acted:
Didn't mourn for Li'l 'Stracted;
Sat by the fire and smoked her pipe;
"Don't mind 'Stracted,
'Stracted's ripe.
I'll be going mighty soon,
Can't wait now for a Harvest Moon."*

*Years sift by in the clearing in the pines:
Sunlight, moonlight, April rain
Stitch the patterns of life again.
And some folks see,
When the moon is up,
'Stracted dancing with his one-eyed pup;
And the hare and the possum,
The fox and the coon,
Tobacco-stick horse and big black bear,
Dancing, dancing, dancing there,
Whirling and floating in the Harvest Moon;
'Stracted dancing, and his little shirt tail
Buoyed in the wind like a glistening sail;
And his little black hands
And his little black feet
Make patterns of dark on a silver sheet.*

Devon thought: "I feel so well,
I can talk and laugh. I can
die"—but he didn't.

Noon Magic

GERTRUDE LEVY

THAT MORNING JOHN DEVON waked to full, clarifying vigor, unaccountably rested in body and mind. He stretched at ease, marveling at the sense of freedom from physical discomfort. His wide-open eyes flicked at the glittering array of medicine bottles on the dresser. Then he got up and dressed quickly. There was no petulant fumbling and rejection of neckties, and no dull avoidance of his own mirrored image, as he completed the details of his toilet with decisive speed. The haze which for many months had clouded his mind and senses was gone.

"I feel so well," he said to himself in amazement, "I feel as if I could lick the world!"

He rang for his breakfast, and ate it with keen relish at the alcove window of his hotel sitting-room, looking down with pleasure at the crowded street some twenty stories below. After breakfast he prepared to go out, and made a quick selection from the fifty-odd walking sticks which he had once found it amusing to collect from many parts of the world. He chose almost immediately a stick which he had not used for years, a beautiful Malacca which Theresa had given him, embossed with her monogram, not his. He was pleased that it seemed so smoothly, unemotionally companionable under his hand.