

One of a series of short stories describing the adventures of magical beings and their overlap into the "real" world of approximately 1900, originally told as bedtime stories. Winger is a primary character of the series, usually appearing as a monkey with butterfly wings, and is both a leader of the local magical community and something of a problem to said community and nearby humans.

The Skillful Toolbox

1.

Somewhere, there is or was a small town on the slopes of an old mountain, surrounded by forest.

Normally, most people (of the human variety, that is) would think the town was the most interesting part of this scene - a place of human settlement, enterprise, and overall "civilization." But humans were known as "Slow Ones" by the *other* inhabitants of the area, and the town hardly even rated as far as activity and energy went. The forest teemed, and the mountain held potential in reserve. Even the ground beneath the town practically vibrated with creative activity . . .

2.

Deep under the ground there was a chamber. Its walls were covered with shelves filled with "projects" finished or forgotten, and bundles and bags of raw materials. Mysterious machines stood around the room on tables or on the floor. Other tables were covered in intricate tools and pieces of work under way. The whole chamber was protected from the upper earth by a ceiling made of strong intertwined roots, and lit by glowing balls of roots.

This was the workshop of Skillful, of the order of being often called an Artisan by those who know of his type and their work - a temporal being of power who had been subtly shaped by the activity of Slow Ones as they moved into this part of the world. At first glance, Skillful looked like a raccoon with many Slow One attributes, including standing on his hind legs and capable hands, though not so much if you looked at him closely.

Skillful made tools out of the sheer love of making things. As a being of power, his tools were capable of affecting the world in both physical and "other" ways: shears that would cut off a branch and help the plant heal, hammers that drove nails easily and true. His products were a blessing to the Slow Ones that lived in the town and not infrequently somehow ended up with one, and were avidly sought by others of his kind both nearby and in scattered farther places.

Skillful worked in his workshop, assisted by other artisans and houselings, supplied by gopher-like gatherers. The longer and harder he worked, the more powerful his creations became, and the greater his joy in making them. He lost all his time in creation, not sleeping, hardly eating, day after night after day.

Eventually, Skillful Forgot himself.

3.

It was a beautiful day - spring time in the Forest. Sunlight passed through the not yet complete leafy roof, small green things were forcing their way up through the stuff of the Forest floor. small forest beings, powerful or mundane, were moving around filled with the promise of spring.

Winger was out in the day, enjoying the change it represented. helping change along, empowering flowers to bloom and leaves to unfold, because it made him happy. Some beings that saw Winger coming made themselves scarce, but this made Winger happy, too. Spring was a good time for playfulness, and Winger was a known agent of playfulness.

It was surprising, then, to have a being - a raccoon-like Artisan - stay slumped in a seated position as Winger approached, neither getting up to greet and distract with talk and thoughts, nor making itself scarce.

Winger crept up around tree trunks to where the being sat on the ground. It was Greenly, known for the ability to grow things in a subterranean garden nearby. Greenly gave the feeling of sorrow.

Winger leapt over Greenly's head, and landed in front. 'It's spring - why are you sad?'

Greenly started, but didn't really change posture or feeling. "Skillful has been stolen."

"Stolen? But how is that possible . . ." But it became apparent to Winger immediately how that was possible - Skillful was a maker and user of tools. If he became too involved in their making or use, he was quite likely to become one himself. Such is the way amongst beings of power, Winger so clearly knew.

"So he's, what, a pair of pliers?" said Winger.

Greenly burst into tears. 'A whole toolbox - a golden box, pliers, some cutters, turners, a hammer, other things.'

Winger nodded appreciatively. Skillful clearly was truly skilled to transform into a loaded toolbox when he forgot himself. "So, what's the problem? Let me see him, I'll wake him up."

Greenly cried silently for a moment. "I tried to wake him up myself, but I couldn't. I went to get Elder to see if she could wake him, but while I was gone, he was stolen!"

"Ahhh . . . well, a skilled artisan becomes a useful, useful set of tools . . . tempting! So: who stole him?"

"Covet . . ."

This made sense- Covet was a gatherer who traded with traders from other places who liked to deal in the most powerful and unique objects, often Skillful's work.

Winger scooped up Greenly and winged into the air, immediately diving into a hole between some tree roots nearby - an entrance to the underground tunnels. Winger bumped along half flying, half running until the tunnel ended in a large chamber. A Trading chamber - gopher and ground-squirrel like gatherers, houselings, and a variety of others all talking and milling around in a mess of low tables, barrels and bags, with loose objects of all description out on display.

Activity died down as Winger was noted in the centre of the chamber, placing Greenly next to himself.

'So, I'm looking for a toolbox . . . anyone have one?' Winger said.

Several were offered, a couple by very persistent bargainers who wouldn't take "no" for an answer, but none were the one in question.

"To clarify: I'm looking for a *specific* toolbox - namely the Artisan you know as Skillful. Greenly, Skillful's friend and companion, is worried."

There was an answering murmur of understanding and speculation. Forgetting oneself was the secret fear and best source of stories anyone could have. So many repeatable tales involved someone turning into a pocket watch, knife, or particularly fine feather, then travelling off on adventures with a Slow One hero before being quite accidentally returned to their original state, often at a moment opportune to some misadventure the hero was having.

But Skillful was not present, not even as a "reserve item" under a table or in a bag.

"He was last seen in the company of Covet," Winger added. "Not through his own choice, of course. Has anyone seen Covet?"

Discussion. Covet, it was determined, had been present earlier, gone and returned, then left again through the western tunnel.

"The western tunnel," mused Winger aloud. "he's going over the mountain."

Greenly looked alarmed. "So he plans to trade away Skillful in some other place! he'd probably get many, many toolboxes of lesser power for Skillful, in the right one."

Winger shrugged. "And Skillful would no doubt be acquired by a maker of tremendous skill, or perhaps go through the hands of many crafters. A great experience for him - even if he doesn't remember, the doing of the work will . . ."

Greenly looked stricken.

"Fine - we'll try and catch up with Covet. I wasn't planning on going over the mountain today, but sometimes the best things aren't planned on . . ."

4.

Winger and Greenly rose up from the Forest floor and flew along up the slow slope of the mountain, along the typical, easiest path beings took to go over the mountain. In short order Winger noted a ground squirrel walking upright and somewhat trepidatiously down the slope.

Winger swooped in and dropped Greenly next to Covet.

"This hasn't been a good day," Covet said.

"For more than just you," said Winger. "I appreciate the impulse to take advantage of a good opportunity, but the one you took was neither good nor advantageous. Please, can you reunite Greenly with Skillful?"

Covet shrugged ‘Wish that I could, especially now that you’re here - Such a trade I could’ve made! But I don’t have him anymore. He was a prize! I’d stopped to look through him - so many tools, just shining with power! - And a Slow One came up behind me. It gave me a swat and I dropped and spilled Skillful - tried to gather him up and run, but it hit me again. I had to run.’

Greenly starting crying again.

‘So, a Slow One has him?’ said Winger.

‘Yes, it gathered him up while I watched, went back down the hill, I presume to its town.’

‘It has *all* of him?’

Covet made wide eyes of surprise, then shrugged and pulled a golden pair of pliers from its fur, handed them to Winger.

‘This could get tricky,’ Winger said.

5.

So, it went like this:

Matt, a local jack-of-all-trades, had been broke due to an excess of fun in the last little while. The nature of some of the fun he had had resulted in most potential employers in town not wanting to employ him. So, Matt had been forced to make up his own employment, in this case pursuing something with some inherent risk -going into the Forest - to gather something that would give a good return on the money versus effort scale, namely the mushrooms and plants found only there that were popular with the medicine quacks that often happened through town. He had equipped himself as best he could, with a couple of large sacks, a piece of dry bread, a large stick, and a wooden token on a string he had been told was protection against the types of misfortune the forest was credited with.

And, with a couple of second thoughts, he had plunged in, out of the town, its surrounding settlements where he currently wasn’t welcome, and away from the roads and paths. The going had been slow and nerve-wracking, and the results poor, until he had decided to climb the so-ominous mountain a bit before turning back. There, he had stumbled upon a ground squirrel apparently playing with a spilled set of tools. Tremendous luck! something possibly more valuable than mushrooms or leaves, and lunch! But the squirrel had gotten away. The tools seemed fine, to his unskilled eye. But when he had returned to town and brought them for assessment to his brother-in-law, Silas the Tinker, Silas had remembered a debt stemming from Matt’s recent fun -the solo consumption of the family’s last keg of cider . . . a debt Matt’s disloyal sister Ana supported with crossed arms. So he was out everything from his trip into the woods.

It was a windfall for Silas. Tinkering in town had been marginal, and there hadn’t been enough money or opportunity to properly maintain his tools. he had been resorting to sawing at copper with a dull old knife, making single-use replacements out of wood. Now this - replacements, and more! So many fine tools, many of which he had never seen before, but the use of which seemed to leap to mind as soon as he touched them. He had eagerly set to the first work he could find - not having had any for-pay customer work, he had started repairing the pots and tools laying around the shop - and in no time had brought them

all to a fine state, newer than new. Ana, seeing the opportunity, had placed them in the shop window and they quickly drew a crowd and were sold in no time. Silas had already forgotten about them - he had taken a number of old copper pots, and almost dreamlike hammered them down and back together again into the form of one of the fancy tea urns he had once seen in a travelling merchant's possession. On being put in the window, Silas' version was immediately bought by the wealthiest merchant in town.

But by then, Silas was on to other things. A fine knife. a pair of amazingly sharp shears. A sudden interest in ornamenting copper pots with leaves and vines. Parts for a clock so the town could have the grand square it deserved . . .

Word spread on his sudden amazing skills and results. people remembered old broken things, had them fixed, and marvelled at their effectiveness - pots that boiled quickly, pans that never burned anything, bright lanterns, strangely light and manageable farm implements.

'I guess he was just waiting for the right set of tools,' said some.

"I hear them tools were found in the Forest," said others.

Matt's problems were increased when the previous owner of the wooden token demanded it back, in light of its possible role in the discovery.

6.

So Silas the Tinker and family found themselves reasonably well off in a fairly short amount of time. Word of his new found skill had spread by the railroad and down the two roads, and those passing through made sure to visit his shop.

But then, one night while he was taking his ease in his workshop and admiring progress on a small brass music box, he noted something glinting outside the window. New well-known money equals thieves - he grabbed up the small pistol he had recently repaired from scrap, cocked it.

Continued vague movement. A flash of gold. Curious, he thought.

Cautiously he stood and opened the window with one hand, pistol the ready in the other.

"Who is it?" he said, as sternly as possible after being startled in the middle of the night.

"Thank you," an odd, high voice said from the darkness. 'We need to talk to you . . . "

'Bout what?' said Silas, knowing immediately *what*.

'You have . . . something . . . that belongs to us. Can we have it back?'

"Don't know what you're talking about. Don't have anything that could belong properly to sneak thieves in the night, or goblins, or fairies."

he started to close the window, but when it was about shut a long-fingered hand shot out of the dark, curled around the window's edge and kept it open.

“You found a good thing, and that's a good thing to happen,” said the high voice. “And I gather you've had fortune from it, which is a good thing to happen as well. But there are others who desire this thing more than you. It means more than you know. Their happiness depends on having it back.”

Silas stepped back and waved the pistol at the window. “Don't know who or what, but I see no reason to give anything back. If you think I done you wrong, see the sheriff. Or, if you say you're some Forest thing, come and take it.”

The hand dropped from the window frame. “As I once told you, or another like you, these things you make and surround yourself with, protect you. These walls, made things. I could take our . . . object . . . but i prefer your cooperation, to save the energy and time. Cooperate and you have my goodwill. Make me work, and you may be sorry.”

Silas slammed the window so hard a pane cracked. he sat in his chair facing the window, pistol in hand, until he fell asleep.

7.

Silas the Tinker nervously continued his trade. He felt it important to use his new tools as much as possible, as if something was about to happen to them, but at the same time his interest was strangely subdued.

The big tree next to the house seemed to grow each passing night. he paid Matt to chop it down.

The flowers Ana had planted in back of the house took on a wild appearance - too many petals, too big. Silas accidentally let the goat out of its pen, and they were gone.

And every night, the sensation of being watched though any nearby window. He was determined, though - the tools were a gift beyond price. An accidental look one night while sitting in his workshop, thinking about making things gave him a glimpse of an odd face pressed against the glass. Another time, the window latch was rattled. He ignored the windows, even when he couldn't sleep.

Then, one day, his daughter Clarise had come home with a raccoon - strangely tame, it had come trilling out of the woods and followed her. Clarise was delighted. Silas bubbled over with suspicion of anything strange, and demanded it be taken away immediately. Ana was startled by his response.

“It's the pet of someone - maybe they got separated and it can't find its master. Maybe Clarise reminds it of its master. But is there harm in letting it stay around? it makes her happy with its playing, and its owner may come back around here.”

Silas had grudgingly, suspiciously, allowed it to stay - first in the wood shed at the side of the house, but gradually it snuck in to the main room of the house. It seemed perfectly happy and harmless, constantly playing and clowning, entertaining customers. Slowly he warmed to it, though he never let it into his workshop.

One day, it ran away. Clarise was beside herself, Silas worried. It returned the next morning, scratching at the back door. He opened it and the raccoon ran in - he noticed it was running on three legs, had something small clutched in one front paw. he grabbed it, pried the object free - a small lustery white orb, covered with fine curving lines. Beautiful, inspirational. The raccoon pawed for it, but he carried it to his workshop and shut the door.

he sat in his chair and considered the tiny orb. Was it some form of bribe? Was the raccoon some kind of sneaking agent, or just a raccoon that liked shiny things as they were said to do?

Whatever its origins, a pleasant thing. ideal for setting into something - a pendant, a clock face? Its curling-line theme could be carried on to the rest of whatever object it was placed in . . .

He started to drift off. His hand fell to the workbench and the orb rolled free. And kept rolling, right up to the golden toolbox where it sat on the workbench.

Silas jerked back to wakefulness. The toolbox and its contents had begun glowing. A trick! he grabbed it up and held it to his chest, still sitting. He felt something thrumming through it and into him.

Something began tapping at the window. an odd face pressed against the glass.

“Your trick won’t work!” Silas shouted. “See? I still have it!”

he heard a scratching and then the door of the workshop creaking open behind him. Clarise’s raccoon came cautiously into sight, stopped in front of him and stood on its hind legs, sniffing. Silas clutched the toolbox tighter - it felt to be moving around, trying to escape.

More tapping at the window. The raccoon dropped to all fours again, climbed the wall and began fiddling with the latch.

The window drifted open, and the odd face was there, and a long hand, holding what looked like another tool from the toolbox - a golden, handled thing.

“I just wanted to give you this,” the high fast voice said, and tossed the tool to Silas, who unthinking caught it.

There was an electric feel that stood his hair on end, and the impression of a flash of colours. the toolbox was outlined in dancing lights before it and Silas were sent flying by some impact.

he recovered a moment later on the floor, with a raccoon in his lap. Or something very much *like* a raccoon. It glared at him, then held up one paw. Without thinking, Silas held out his hand. The small lustery orb dropped, and his closed his hand around it.

Clarise’s raccoon - now, also a little *more* than a raccoon - leapt into his lap next to the first. Then, together, they vanished out the window.

Silas continued to lay on the floor. The toolbox was gone, the raccoons were gone, but something *else* was definitely still *there*, outside the window. he lay on the floor and held his breath.

‘You know, I appreciate the desire to take advantage of a good opportunity,’ the voice said. ‘We all have the impulse, more, maybe, when we don’t have the whole story. You, your kind, *never* have the whole story, but still have to try and get by in the world with what you can grasp. So you take chances. I guess you aren’t totally to blame. You’ve had a rewarding experience, and hopefully a lesson. be sorry if you want, but I don’t recommend it.’ The long hand reached in and closed the window.

8.

Silas continued his trade. While his actual production quality was reduced by the loss of the toolbox, other factors compensated - the dizzying intuition of craft still echoing in his mind, his new reputation as a quality artisan, the fact he was able to buy newer, better tools with his new wealth, and the experience, knowledge, of something *else* . . .

he mounted the lustery orb in a silver pendant, and gave it to Clarise as a consolation for losing her raccoon. He was conflicted on this - obviously an object of some unknown power - but at the same time knew it to be the proper thing to do.

9.

And Skillful returned to his workshop under the ground, Greenly to the nearby garden, and Winger to the Forest. Covet eventually began trading Skillful’s goods with other places, again. And maybe any of them became so interested in what they were doing and Forgot Themselves, resulting in adventures to some extent or another. Because it’s their nature.