

# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 11/12/2013



## Lord of the Sewers

By Ed Greenwood

*How and where and when did the **Forgotten Realms** start? What's at the heart of Ed Greenwood's creation, and how does the Grand Master of the Realms use his own world when he runs **D&D** adventures for the players in his campaign? "Forging the Forgotten Realms" is a weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.*

Many in the Realms hear of this or that hero who slays a dragon, finds the Ulouth Marr (that's the Lost Gem of Dweomermastery, to those who aren't sages), or topples corrupt thrones, but there are unsung daily heroics that don't get talked about—or that get seen in a very different way than the deeds of swordswingers and paladins of shining virtue.

One overlooked hero is someone who's recently risen to the attention of civic authorities and increasing numbers of adventurers in more than a few cities in the interior of Faerûn—most notably cities that don't have the luxury (if that's the right word) of flushing their daily wastes out to sea by means of tides or rivers.

I write now of a quiet, bright middle-aged gnome who so far as the wider Realms knows has never swung a sword or hurled a spell in anger. I write of Joster Barbellow, Lord of the Sewers.

### Making the Stink Flow

A problem in any large population center is what to do with the human and animal wastes produced constantly. "Nothing" is not an option, because unless the settlement is atop a mountain with slopes falling steeply away on all sides (common for fortresses, but rare indeed for cities), the city will soon literally drown in its own "stink" (to use the politest everyday term).

Many settlements surrounded by farms pay dung-carters to gather wastes (often by night or early morning, sometimes—in the poorer areas of Suzail, for example, as shown in my novel *Elminster's Daughter*—on a copper-piece-per-bucket system) and cart them out of "windshot" of town, to be dumped in middens or even directly onto farm fields, as fertilizer. Provided the manure "cures" long enough, this causes few problems for those who live locally (any parasites and diseases are shared, and most individuals who aren't in poor health have bodies that are "used to" them), but often upsets the digestions of wayfarers (what we real-world types sometimes call "Montezuma's Revenge" or "traveler's upset" or similar euphemisms).



Sewage tainting local water can be a more common problem, but once known, it's usually dealt with by boiling any cleaning and cooking water, and making "small beer" or stronger spirits for drinking.

Port cities, and those on rivers, usually take the cheapest and easiest route; they use already moving water (rivers or tides or both) to sluice local wastes away to elsewhere. This can cause problems downstream, and real-world wars have been fought over such matters, but consider the inland city, that lacks a major river and must depend on small springs or wells, or is wary of polluting their sole drinking supply.

Enter the gnomes. In the Realms, dwarves and halflings and in rarer cases enterprising humans and elves have developed sewer systems for various settlements, but it's the gnomes who've specialized, over centuries, in designing, repairing, and perfecting the sewer systems of large mixed-population cities. Average human citizens may be unaware that the sewers somewhere under their feet are planned, enlarged, and fixed with gnome oversight, but when the sewers break down (or rather, "back up" into homes, sometimes with geyser-like force and always with noisome results), they become very interested in such things, and fast.

## Joster Barbellow

This is where Joster Barbellow comes in. A member of one of the three largest gnome families or clans best known for their sewer expertise (the Barbellows, the Narlens, and the Thallows), Joster has acquired a reputation over the last three decades for expertise by successfully fixing, expanding, and improving the sewer systems of Phent, Elversult, Nonthal, Elturel, Riatavin, Saradush, and Secomber. Each settlement has hired him away from the last as their needs became pressing, and he has been successful in each commission. Somewhere along the way, someone dubbed him the "Lord of the Sewers," and the name stuck.

In part, Joster's successes are due to improvements in pumps made and improved upon by many gnome designers (devices that move water and the stink through a sewer system, largely by means of devices we real-world types would term "Archimedes screws"), and in part, he's soared thanks to his own ongoing perfecting of the dung-eating fungi farm. This latter skill has brought him to the notice of more than a few adventurers.

## Fungi Farms

Gnomes have long understood that the marshwort and spadegrass surface swamp plants (be aware that these names are shared by dozens of different plants across Faerûn, and those desiring to duplicate the water-cleansing results have to procure the right ones), and dozens of subterranean fungi (common in caves and the upper Underdark), can filter and feed upon wastes, cleansing water of the toxins and particulates carried by urine and excrement to the point that it becomes drinkable and can be reused.

The most popular (with sewage-treaters) of these "scouring fungi" include, in descending order of abundance and use:

- *The Redhorn*: A tall, narrow, intensely poisonous maroon to reddish-brown pointed-cap and long-stalked toadstool that looks rather like an oversized horsetail. It can grow from knee-height to an average human's height and be as thick as an adult human wrist, up to seven feet high and as thick around as a young duskwood tree or a slender adult human waist.
- *The Longstalk*: A dusky-brown mushroom that seems to be "all stem," flaring at the top only slightly, to form a wrinkled brown cap rather than a dome. It's usually about as tall as a human, but can be twelve or even fourteen feet tall given sufficiently rich nutrients. Its height has become the canary-in-the-coal-mine-like signal of how "dirty" sewage is, in a particular spot.
- *The Addergal*: Also called "brainbush," this many-lobed, shrublike, faintly ale-brown-glowing fungi resembles a gigantic human brain budding out in all directions with protruding "baby brains." It grows in waist-high clumps that can readily be divided and replanted by gardeners, and it has an intense cinnamon-like smell when brushed against or broken. This scent attracts flies and other insects, which stick to its sticky surfaces and are then absorbed and devoured (so it's popular with those trying to get rid of swarming flies).
- *The Sungur*: A large, greenish-white, sickly-sweet-smelling mushroom that grows low to the ground on thick, woody stalks but has huge circular domed caps (some as large as small human cottages). It gives off a strong, continuous yellow-white glow bright enough to read by, and symbiotically hosts laedur-worms. These maggot-like brown boring worms tunnel and devour corpses, plant matter, excrement, and everything else that isn't stone or metal (these slow-moving cousins of rot grubs won't eat living flesh unless there's nothing else to be had).

To accomplish sewage cleansing, these fungi must be planted in the right combinations and sufficiently abundant numbers. It needs to be in soil containing enough gravel or loose rock or sufficiently little clay that it can't trap excrement in accretions kept away from the air, and it must be situated in such a way that water and sewage can percolate through it rather than building up in ever-deeper stagnant storage sumps.

All of which means gardening—that is, shifting soil, planting, arranging drainage channels, and the like—by tenders who know what they're doing.

Not only fungi must be planted and drainage seen to, but clean water must be pumped back to the surface for reuse. In some places, pumps are powered by the brawn of slaves or prisoners, but in most places, mules, oxen, or horses are yoked to capstans and driven in an endless circle, turning a shaft that by means of underground pulleys and belts works the pumps. (Older pumps are gigantic pistons, known in the Realms as "swallow-rams," and newer ones are the Archimedes screws, popularly known in the Realms as "gulp-spirals.")

Three complications have arisen with fungi farms that often necessitate the hiring of adventurers to patrol: invasion from the Underdark due to denizen tunneling or access through natural or bored drains (connecting the fungi farms to lower levels of the wild Underdark); stealthy use of fungi farms to hide treasure, contraband, and even kidnapped victims by the lawless; and gulguthra.

Gulguthra (otyughs and neo-otyughs) love fungi farms. They flourish in the plentiful excrement and the warm (due to the processes of decay) and damp (from the presence of water and urine), and grow rapidly. Moreover, conditions are ideal for their breeding. These creatures produce offspring twice a year, usually having single live young but increasingly a litter of two, which after the six months or so of being reared and taught by their parents, are moved by Joster's adventurer-assisted teams of workers to new locations. These relocation sites

are either elsewhere in the same expanding sewer system, or they are new middens or fungi farms elsewhere.

### Disquieting Rumors

Over the years, whispers have arisen in most of the communities where the Lord of the Sewers has worked that Joster Barbellow has quietly reached agreements with thieves' guilds and other unsavory cabals, cults, and organizations that allow these undesirables to use the fungi farm caverns for their own purposes, unmolested and unreported, in return for paying regular rent to certain Barbellow family "collectors."

Though this was certainly true in Phent, it's not known if Joster himself was involved or aware of this practice.

More recently, there's been talk of the Lord of the Sewers working with doppelgangers and even beholders on various covert subterranean activities—but then, there have always been local guilds opposed to his hiring and work in "their" turf, and (as Elminster put it, long ago): "Rumor is an all-too-easily-deployed cowards' weapon."

The truth about Joster Barbellow has yet to be uncovered. Any DM can have it be whatever they desire, of course, in their own Realms campaign. Gamers are, after all, endlessly inventive.

Gulguthra stew, anyone?

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### About the Author

**Ed Greenwood** is the man who unleashed the *Forgotten Realms* setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, and he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.

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