

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 2/22/2013



Melve's Plan

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.*

his time around, I'd like to present something of a sequel to my last column. Like that screed on dwarven underways, this one has a long and unwieldy subtitle, and here it is: "Why Gnomes Chose To Fit In, and How They Do It."

In other words, this is a look at the character of "civilized" gnomes in the Realms. By civilized, folk in the Realms mean those gnomes who choose to dwell in cities and Underdark trademoots across—and under—Faerûn, as opposed to wandering wild in hunting and foraging bands (the relatively few gnomes some humans call "monsters"). Gnomes "fit in" by finding places in human-dominated societies as skilled laborers (warehouse and shop clerks, finemiths, bakers, launderers, garment-makers, dyers, finecarvers, repairers, and craftworkers of all sorts)—but to gnomes, "fitting in" means something much more than simply making a living among larger, stronger races.

Most people have a simplistic conception of gnomish handiwork based on the few samples on display in temples of Gond, the now-commonplace gnome-designed "arrays" that permit a master to summon or signal distant servants in a large mansion, enable a staffer in a shop or warehouse to open a door or hopper-jaw from afar, or cause an item to begin trundling down a chute or shuttling along a conveyance. These examples reinforce the stereotype that the gnomes' inventions and tinkering are primarily amusing and useful spring-driven clockwork-and-pulley arrays that let a person sitting in one spot transmit control or pushing/pulling energy to another spot.

It is clear from these devices that gnomes have keen eyesight, the ability to work precisely on small, fine machines, knowledge of mathematics, and an understanding of how cogs, spindles, belts, pulleys, and gates can work together in a sequence to, say, wring out wet laundry or stamp a mark into successive moving metal plates.

Fortunately for gnomes, most people don't seem to make the conceptual leap to the fact that such skills could also be put to murderous use as peerless trapmakers. If gnomes devoted their ingenuity to traps, they might shift the balance of power in the Underdark and surface Realms alike to make gnomes mighty beyond their numbers and stature. Gnomes could go so far as to ruthlessly rule large parts of Faerûn—if they chose to be ruthless.

Instead, most of them choose to accept menial positions in society, making themselves useful and rarely cleaving to high public profile or respect. Why? The answer (in the Realms, anyway) lies in a gnome who lived long ago and is now best remembered as Melve the Wise.

Melve's Way, or as it's become known down the long centuries since his death, Melve's Plan, was to 'fit in'—to become so useful to the larger, stronger, more brutal, and faster-breeding humans that humans would accept, tolerate, and even include gnomes in their lives. The gnomes could focus on what they are good at, and once humans came to depend on the crafts and services gnomes provide, humans would protect the gnomes with their greater strength just as they protect themselves.

Melve Urondur (of the now huge and farflung Urondur family, one of what are now the three largest gnome families in Faerûn, the others being the Relanderquists and the Amaldurs) was a small, quiet, unassuming gnome who (as Elminster puts it) "knew how to observe, interpret, and see consequences, not just see what was about to slap him in the face."

Melve saw that elves, dwarves, and giants—especially giants—couldn't breed fast enough to compete with the

humans who were displacing them from their traditional seats of power. He predicted that eventually, all races would be squeezed from above by the power-hungry humans and fecund goblinkin (orcs, goblins, hobgoblins, and related breeds) on the surface, and from below by the expansionistic drow and other Underdark dwellers. Between those forces, everyone else needed to find a niche in which they could survive and thrive.

Melve further saw that his race, the gnomes, "stood in the shadows" (Elminster's words again) of the more numerous and capable competitors (dwarves in the Underdark and in the hearts of mountains, and halflings everywhere else). They might well be swept away into a few dwindling handfuls in less than a century if they didn't adapt and find the best role they could.

He foresaw a role he thought was best, and he was right, which is why "the Forgotten Folk" of the Realms thrive in great numbers today—largely overlooked, which is just the way they want it.

That's why gnomes sew, cobble, nail, and repair whatever needs mending or making for desperate travelers in waystops all over the Realms and do the same for sedentary city-dwellers in cellars, back rooms, and garrets from Waterdeep to Telflamm, from Mirabar to Zabbasz.

Gnomes have become trusted and, more importantly, *necessary* neighbors who make everyday life a lot better than it would otherwise be. They are industrious workers who must be more than tolerated; they must be protected and treated well so they don't go elsewhere. Gnomes make, fix, and alter what everyone else needs, and their skills can't be easily found in any other single package. In many a human city, gnomes see to the plumbing and the rooftop and window-box gardening, the around-the-house repairs, producing herbs and spices, swift makeovers when a dress is torn or a fine gown stained (sew a pre-prepared fabric rose over the blemish, adorn the seams with embroidered vines and leaves, and what is unsightly becomes a bright new adornment). They step on the toes of many a trade guild, but even the guilds find the gnomes useful as allies and are loathe to antagonize them even when the gnomes' activities violate a guild's charter.

Gnomes are the ones who most often childproof cabinets by drilling holes for iron pins that link doors and frames, so only someone who knows where the hidden pins are and has a lodestone (magnet) can draw the pin and get the cabinet open. Gnomes devise and install almost all alarm systems that are more complex than a tripcord tied to pots and pans slung over a hook, and gnomes are who most city-dwelling humans call upon when something complex needs to be oiled or when unseen, internal mechanisms—such as locks—need repair. Of course there are human, dwarf, and halfling locksmiths, but the gnomes are known Realms-wide as the most clever, the most cheerful, the most helpful, and the most competent.

That's largely thanks to Melve, who long ago wrote, "We must help humans, befriend them, be unfailingly cheerful." It's also thanks to the generations of gnomes since, who had the good sense to heed Melve, see that he was right, school themselves to cheerful and industrious endurance, and live happier lives because of it. The gnomes, and everyone around them, benefited.

Most humans are entirely unaware that the popular jewel boxes equipped with poisoned needles that knock out or slay those who don't know the correct method for opening them were gnome inventions. They are equally unaware that many gnome households are guarded by "snap-jaw" traps (oversized, toothed mousetraps); these are commonly used to catch rats, but gnomes treat them with poisons that can be deadly to humans or cause them to flee from nightmarish visions only they can see, if they are clumsy enough to catch their fingers when reaching into darkened cupboards or shelves to steal keys or valuables. Few know that the hairpins and combs worn by many a gnomish lass and lady are in fact slender metal scabbards holding needles treated with "gnomestop," a translucent grayish ointment that briefly paralyzes humans and halflings.

As Melve wrote so long ago, "What others know not about gnomes is our shield and salvation. Take care larger folk see only what you want them to see and see us only as we wish to be seen."

Advice, Elminster adds dryly, that individuals of all races would find useful, if they could adhere to it as the gnomes have.

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.