

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 4/25/2013



The Stench Carts

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.*

s the old ballad puts it: "And every day the sun comes up, and the stench carts roll away."

"Stench carts" was an everyday term two centuries ago; these days, the Realms more often knows them by the slightly more polite term "nightsoil wagons."

Every city in the Heartlands, even those that have sewers, is served by these noisome conveyances. They rumble (their double-width wooden wheels often quieted with rag wrappings, when operating in districts where important and powerful folk dwell) through streets and alleys by night, emptying chamberpots and "dungbuckets" (buckets that hold the combined contents of a household's chamberpots) for 1 cp each. These wagons service attic and other rental properties in buildings not connected to sewers, temporary "back of yard" privies, and any home, shop, or warehouse that wants refuse carted away (from broken furniture to old clothes and spoiled food to kitchen scraps).

Fascinating to some, but others may well ask: Why explore the workings of a fantasy setting in such, ah, vivid (not to say pungent) detail? Well, the lore that follows does have some use in adventures and to adventurers. Read on . . .

Most nightcarts are creaking, rickety old open wagons pulled by mules or oxen; for such work, stolid disposition and strength are valued over speed. A two-beast team is typical, and most such "nightcart plodders" wear feedbags and blinders.

Necessary this work may be, but that doesn't stop most folk from looking down on dung-and-bone wagoners (who are more often called "dung-carters" in daily speech) thanks to the nature of the profession and the smells that cling to those who toil in it.

Most citizens, if they think about what dung-carters do at all, believe they take the contents of chamberpots "away somewhere," and that's the extent of their work.

The reality is far different. Dung-carters do take away the dung (usually to dung-hills that are carefully mixed with rotting vegetables and fire ashes, over time, to make farm fertilizer), but they do far more than that.

They sell kitchen scraps to the owners of pigs and goats, rags (dry white rags fetching the highest price, usually 3 cp per pound, and those "of good color" going for 2 cp/pound) to paper makers, and bones (usually selling for 2 cp/pound, but human bones fetching twice that) to alchemist and necromancers and carvers. Bone is popular for making the handles of knives and small tools, and also in some jewelry and the making of small toys. Large hollow bones fetch high prices as scroll tubes, and horns as drinking-jacks and belt storage containers.

Dung-carters collect and sell (or make and use, themselves) grease from bones for wagon axle lubricant and soapmaking. Smiths everywhere buy scrap metal from dung-carters, who pry up street cobbles to glean fallen horseshoe nails in addition to the more usual collecting of broken bits of metal from households for 1 cp/bucket (that price includes anything that sticks out of a bucket but can be carried along in it). [Tempered](#) steel can fetch as much as 1 cp for a "goodly piece," and rust-free iron almost as much, but nails and other "small oddments," as well as brass, copper and pewter, sell for about 4 cp/pound.

Dung-carters are also infamous for their sideline businesses: taking away the corpses of deceased pets (and sometimes even stillborn children); carrying messages (in lore, very often lovers' notes under the very noses of disapproving parents or superiors among the servants); and smuggling contraband or fugitives—adventurers wanted by the authorities, for instance—out of cities, concealed under the noisome contents of the wagons.

Rare is the city watchman (and even rarer, the private citizen) who wants to pry too closely into the heaps of fly-swarmed filth carried by most nightsoil carts. Moreover, many folk don't look too closely at a dirty dung-carter clad in old and unclean clothing, so even nobles and rulers with prices on their heads have successfully rumbled out of cities that are being energetically searched for them, as "just a dung-carter" (usually after paying the real dung-carter enough for clothes, wagons, and the beasts that pull the wagons for that carter to retire in luxury for a decade or more).

Dung-carters don't earn much by their legitimate daily work, but even without such dramatic windfalls, their sidelines can often earn them high coin indeed. Most soon grow used to the reek, develop strong stomachs, and won't hesitate to undertake almost any sort of "muckwork" (such as collecting pieces of dead bodies from battlefields or the scenes of gruesome murders). They also cart off spoiled foods in bulk from warehouses, slaughterhouses, creameries, and so on (skins of spoiled milk are particularly pungent), and are usually experts—or have kin who are skilled—at turning what can be salvaged into something useful (spoiled milk can usually be made into various soft cheeses, spoiled fruit pressed to yield juices that can be combined with odor-cutting substances to yield meat marinades, and so on). Often dung-carters trade small amounts of such "found goods" with everyday citizens for leftover prepared food, to augment their tables, and so eke out fairly good lives despite seldom having many coins to clink together.

Finally, dung-carters in any city know local hiding-places and where to get small, everyday items and substances cheaply—as well as which establishments customarily throw out "good things" and scraps enough to dine on. A typical dung-carter can quickly help someone shelter overnight, or acquire something for a feast or important meeting when most shops are closed for the night.

In Waterdeep, Suzail, and the port cities of Sembia, dung-carters function as shuttle-wagons for many inns and rooming-houses, large and small, or even as "take the drunkards home" conveyances for taverns trying to close in the wee hours, or when the Watch wants senseless and therefore vulnerable citizens taken to safety without Watch patrols being burdened with carrying and protecting them.

Nobles who know they may have future need for the quiet removal of bodies (living or dead), or a messenger or agent few would suspect of being associated with them, often seek out specific dung-carters and establish friendships (giving the carters monetary or useful birthday or anniversary gifts, providing them with alibis, and so on) so as to have them ready to meet such future needs.

Behold a typical dung-carter: Helmeth Sundarl of Suzail, owner of Sundarl Nightsoils. This family firm operates three wagons (though one is an aging, ramshackle wreck kept in reserve, and pressed into service when one of the usual carts—one is large, one much smaller—breaks down) and has a stable of two mules and six oxen; two beasts pull a cart. The Sundarls consist of Helmeth's wife Jarra (who seldom runs a wagon these days, as she has an infant daughter, Telmra, to look after) and three children: the sons Farl and Deldren, and a daughter, Sesteira. On a typical night, Helmeth and Sesteira run one wagon, and Farl and Deldren the other; they switch wagons (and rotate the beasts) from one night to the next so everyone is "in full trim" with both carts and all the beasts.

Sundarl Nightsoils has an office just inside the west wall of Suzail, run by Jarra, which is also their carriage shed and stables; the family lives above it all, sharing the loft with fodder for the beasts.

Sundarl dung-loads are usually collected from the west end of the city, and go out the Field Gates by night (in peacetime, the gates will open throughout the night for nightsoil-wagons), making the last run before dawn. Helmeth owns a field (heaped with dunghills becoming fertilizer in a slow and very smelly manner) and adjacent lime pit (perfect for the disposal of bodies, though he seldom reminds anyone of this) almost two miles due west of Suzail, well back from the seafront and surrounded by the properties of other dung-carters. The dry bowl valley where all of these are located is collectively known as the Wormpits, but is far smaller, safer, and—aside from rats—less monster-haunted than the notorious Rat Hills outside Waterdeep.

Sundarl sells kitchen scraps to the swineherd Arn Luth of Luth's Hill (a muddy sty atop a tiny hill halfway along the cart-track linking Suzail and the Wormpits) and rags to Yarlys Tanreth of Tanreth's Fine Paperworks on Pendle Street.

Most of Sundarl's bones go to Galaskar "the Dark," a sinister soothsayer and "purveyor to necromancers" (a shopkeeper whose sideline is frightening thrillseekers with fake "cult rituals," who occasionally meets covertly with buyers from Marsember who do purchase on behalf of some necromancers), of Galaskar's Door of Horns (a shop crammed with dark costumes, cosmetics, scary paintings, human skull-ornamented furniture, scented

candles, and alchemical remedies) on the Street of Staves. Sundarl also sells large hollow bones, when he can get them, to Nalasso's Scrollworks on Torch Street, where young Imber Nalasso and his wife Varaunta fashion them into fine scroll tubes with chased silver mounts and caps.

Gleaned glass shards are sold by Sundarl to Elsarl's Bottleworks on Stallion Street, where they are melted down and blown into new bottles, and he sells all his scrap metal to the smith Huirim Gosktal of Gosktal's Foundry on Seawind Lane.

Finally, Jarra Sundarl boils all bones gleaned by family wagons, collecting the grease to make her own axle lubricant and soap, for family use.

If Helmeth Sundarl ran his wagons in Waterdeep, where there's far more competition and many buyers for gleanings, he'd likely put far more energy into pitting one smith or alchemist against another, or seeking out the best prices. In Suzail, as he grows older and his back hurts more and more, he'd rather just run his wagons—and make the occasional large sideline windfall.

Sundarl's windfalls usually come from smuggling someone out of the city who's under royal displeasure or fleeing local lawkeepers, or smuggling the occasional small coffer of vials (probably containing strong drugs or even poisons, but Sundarl doesn't care to know or ask) into the city, from contacts who wait in the Wormpits and want the vials delivered to Galaskar or the (as far as Sundarl is concerned) nameless "tall, gaunt Sembian" who lives on an upper floor two doors north of Galaskar.

The War Wizards know about some of Sundarl's silent sideline activities—but so do the Harpers. For reasons of their own, the latter have reached an "understanding" with the War Wizards to leave Sundarl alone. For now.

After all, the nightsoil has to go somewhere, and there are worse dung-carters than Helmeth Sundarl.

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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