

# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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## The Talkative Tavernmaster

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.*

reat **D&D** campaigns have challenges, mysteries, revenge, and stirring battles—and keep DMs busy bringing all that grand stuff to life.

Which is why some of the less-glamorous backbone elements are sometimes neglected, and DMs must scramble to create on the fly, or feel bogged down in details they don't really want to spend so much time on.

This gets exacerbated by all the traveling in many campaigns. Or to put it another way, adventurers go places. They head out into the wilds to find fabled ruins or remote dragon lairs said to be brimming with treasure, they hunt villains who've fled after dirty deeds, and sometimes they themselves must flee from powerful foes, or even authorities, who are hunting them.

Which means a DM's carefully created supporting cast of local nonplayer characters is suddenly left behind, and new individuals, in a new place, must be presented. Hopefully they won't just be nigh-exact copies of the innkeepers, smiths, and cobblers the characters already know, which lands the DM with the inevitable problem of breathing life into a new cast who aren't—even if borrowed lock, stock, and wizard from a published adventure—just names and game statistics.

How to make them real people? A lot of them, and in a hurry?

Well, just as Elminster became my opinionated and often unreliable narrator describing the Realms for us all (and in the process, building in "wobble room" for all DMs to make changes to the published setting, the reality in any campaign differing from Elminster's version of things), one good way to bring local folk to life is to have a garrulous local describe the neighbors.

That local is often an innkeeper or tavernmaster, or an old toper whiling away idle time over a tankard in a tavern. The sort who loves to talk, and who may be difficult to steer or shut down once he or she gets going—which makes this person an ideal DM mouthpiece for feeding adventure ideas to players, amid a flood of gossip and tales of past pratfalls.

All too often adventurers arrive in a new place with needs. Broken weapons or gear must be repaired, something vital has been used up or was never brought along in the first place (enough rope, say), food and drink must be replenished, and so on. So characters seek sources who can see to their needs. Veteran adventurers tend to be wary of innkeepers who send outlanders to vendors of overpriced and bad wares because said vendors pay the innkeepers to steer travelers their way. So seasoned adventurers will look around for the right informant. Which still leaves the DM portraying that informant needing to devise what will be said.

So here's a sample overview of the "local lights" of a small wayside settlement in the Heartlands of the Realms: Harpwood, a tiny wayside hamlet on the High Road about a third of the way out from Easting heading for Proskur. A place that will be new to even avid lorelords of the Realms, since it's too small to appear on most maps. Every word said of it, however, should be readily portable to hamlets and villages elsewhere.

Hearken to Rovon Kendral, the talkative tavernmaster of *The Old Ox and Platter*, "the best and only tavern in all Harpwood" (that doubles as the only public dining hall in Harpwood).

"Ah, now, truth to tell, we've no butchers in Harpwood. Too small a place. Here, everyone does their own, or goes to someone with a smokehouse and hanging frame and pays them with shares of the meat. We sharpen our own blades and tools, too, unless we're made of coin. We've a smith that can do it, right enough—Angarl Marbarskyr, yonder, that big red barn of a place with the smoke plume, see?—and he's a sturdy hammerer; a blacksmith, rough and ready pieces, nothing fancy. Hard drinker, holds grudges, doesn't like outlanders with grand airs or anyone who talks loud and too much. Big man, massive arms on him, nigh as wide as he stands tall. His uncle Lhorlan is the dashing one, or was when younger. These days, Lhorlan "Gingerbeard" is more of a wink and a sly twinkle in the eye than an actual menace to the ladies. More easygoing than Angarl, to be sure, and is our farrier—and a good one, too. He has the smaller forge, without a signboard, beyond Marbarskyr's Anvil. Lives in the back of it, tends horses in the paddocks behind that. Gingerbeard's the closest thing we have to a horse-tender or a waystables, though the Stonepost shelters horses for travelers staying there, and deals in remounts, too.

"Aye, Harpwood's small, right enough. 'Tis hard to miss those two forges, or the mill, or the wayshrine—or yet the Stonepost, and of course you've found my hearth already. So, now, where to start?

"The mill. A mule-mill, no pond and race here, just mules trudging in a circle, turning capstans that turn the grindstones. Grist for feed, but once a tenday they rig the chains and blades and saw wood for a day, a copper a rawblock—a rawblock's a rough timber or piece brought to them; all the cuts you want done to it for a copper piece. The Nellands have the mill, Baerruth Nelland and his five daughters. Don't be jesting with them about missing fingers, for they've a few between them. Baerruth had the mill from his father Farljack, and he had it from his father Melort, but they're dead and gone now, all the old Nellands. Came from Cormyr, they did, backed rebels from Marsember twice too often, and were shown the borders with the grander traitors. Used to be any foe of the Dragon Throne was a favored customer, but that's all old wind to Baerruth. So's wooing-talk to his daughters, by the by; they've heard it all, and spurned high lords and rich farmers alike. Nelland Milling, the signboard says, but it's easier to find the burned roof they've never rebuilt. When that loft burned, they just raised what was left of the floor into a ridgepeak and tiled it, leaving the stub walls pointing up into the sky like so many scorched teeth. Burned and all, still the tallest building in town.

"The wayshrine, now. Just as we're too small to have a ropemaker, a butcher, a cooper, or a finegown shop, we're too small for temples. Or even a dedicated shrine. So we have a wayshrine, consecrated to all, shared by all, and tended by Old Jenna. Jelennara Forthyl, to give her her full name. Seventy summers if she's a day, probably much more, but she goes about in gray skirts and old breast-and-back armor that looks like it was made for her—for the very good reason that it was. A priest of the Wargod, once, she was; an adventurer who rode the Sword Coast North when it was the Savage North, starting battles whenever she couldn't find one. Killed thousands of orcs more than you could count, she did, and more than a few human kings and lordlings, too. Then something happened she won't talk about, and she turned to Chauntea and became a Sheaf-priest for thirty-some summers, then turned her back on that and came here to rebuild the Burned House—we had a hermit of Azuth here, years back, but some outland wizards came and spellcooked him, bringing his cottage down on his head, too—as a shrine for all faiths. It's just one big room with a good slate roof, a flagstone floor, a brazier with pull-shutter chimney-shaft, and a plain stone block altar, with little niches all around the walls holding images of each of the gods, and a stable-shed and privy out back. Nothing fancy, but a place to pray. Jenna doesn't say much, but a few fools who've thought to exalt one god over others have learned right quick that she's still a master of battles, for all her white hair and wrinkles.

"That brings us to the Stonepost Inn. Larger than it looks, because we've land enough here in Harpwood not to have to build upwards here. So we cut the worst of the winter winds by digging down and in, and raising the earth we shift into a mound to windward, a shield at our backs, north and west of us. So the Stonepost is all stone and slate, to keep the risk of fires down, and sprawls, long and low, branching into side-wings wherever they seemed needed. Bleak, some term it, but they use colored glass in their lantern-shades and hang tapestries on the walls, and keep warm broth going night and day. They serve dawnfry and an evening spit-roast, and it's all snug enough. Latches on the insides of all the guest chamber doors, too. 'Secure shelter,' the Alards call it, and they're right enough. Two Alard brothers and their families; nigh fifty of them, now. There were three Alard brothers when they gave up sheep ranching and built the Stonepost, but Drace died years back, leaving just his widow and one daughter—Holone, who runs it all now. Her uncles Huth and Telfar sign the contracts and pay the bills, but Holone oversees the kitchens and the rooms and greets the guests—and keeps a dozen Alard daughters busy at looms a-weaving cloaks and tapestries and bedding and draperies and tablecloaks and I don't know what all; they're all Harpwood has by way of weavers.

"And there's this place, my hold; the Platter. We're the gathering place for all—the old men in the back room, outlanders who want to keep to themselves yonder, the big dining hall out front and the younglings with all their wailing and nursing around back, by the pantries. No brawling here; we managed to shift that to The Antlers when Elengarth opened it, twelve summers back. Here all Harpwood gossips the evenings away if they've a mind, and plays at cards and lanceboard and at lording it over Waterdeep and even darts if they've a mind to, though we banished hurlknife to the Antlers along with all the fistwork and chair-throwing.

"The Antler's harder to find than here, with just the eyes. Yet you can hear it readily enough, late of nights, when it gets loud; the last northside place along the road, heading east out of Harpwood. Where drunkards and those who like to fight go, not to mention those willing to offer their embraces in back rooms for coin, and those seeking such. Jacks and lasses wanting help in bending laws, or to hire someone to do it for them—and those willing to hire on to such shady-work. Run by Ivrem Elengarth, who calls himself a 'reformed adventurer' from Amn, late of Westgate—and one of the few men in Harpwood I wouldn't trust to draw a breath if there was any coin riding on it. Smooth tongue, smile like a fond bride, and not an honest bone in his body, nor an unmalicious thought in his head. Thieving gear? Elengarth. Treasure maps, real or utterly fanciful? Elengarth. Shady contacts in half the cities and towns of the Heartlands, for a gold piece per name and where to seek them? Elengarth. Want a doxy, or to sell your services as one? Elengarth. Seeking anything unlawful, or anything you can't trust out of a bottle? Elengarth. I sell good drink, labeled for what it is; he sells . . . whatever he can fool you into downing. Adventurers looking for work head for The Antlers; there's no signboard, but a huge rack of antlers. Don't bother stealing it; the fourth time someone did, Elengarth had replacements wired together out of dead tree boughs, and that was ten summers gone.

"We have two tailors—Alys Tarntevver, in the blackroof cottage yonder, for swift mends and ready-to-sell clothes, new and used; and Maranthae Greatgaunt, yes of those Greatgaunts, the high-and-mighty nobles of Cormyr, though she'll tell you sharp and firm her name and lineage are her own affair and none of yours, in her house way back behind, by that woodlot, if it's gowns and fitted tunics and grand jerkins you're after, in no hurry.

"Any number of farmers and ranchers in Harpwood are thatchers and carpenters who won't mind work out of the blue in return for ready coin, and more than a dozen of them keep goats or sheep or cattle, and sell cheese and milk—and fresh eggs, most of them, too. If you happen by when winter's coming, more than a few will be looking to sell some of their beasts, too. Osturl Yaendur makes the best cheese, but don't tell him I said that; Nethae and Haengull won't soon forgive me, and they prefer my ale to what they can brew—and lots of it, too.

"Up yon sideroad is the horsepond and Margimmar the baker—great cheese loaves, he does—and two hills along it your nose will find our tanner. Tabrannas Lorshaw, or Lorshaw Leatherworks. The whole family—and he has a big one, he and Marjela and fourteen daughters, if I haven't lose count yet—tans hides, and makes saddles. Not to mention satchels, bags, bracers, greatcloaks, belts, baldrics, sheaths, scabbards, and the gods alone know what all else. Harnesses and reins, slings and bellows and flap-hinges and door-flaps and all. They reek, every last one of them, but it's an honest stink. Soften the leather by treading it in what our bladders let out, they do.

"Which leaves our herbalist, the wagonworks, and the three shops: the manywares emporium, the cellarer, and Lornatar's Leavings. Shops first. Uldryn Lornatar used to be a handsome scourge-of-the-ladies, and wants all the world to think he still is. Tries to act gallant and debonair; hard to pull off, when you're selling junk and used not-yet-quite-junk, untidy crammed rooms of it. When someone dies and their kin takes what they want, Lornatar cleans out the rest and tries to sell it. He takes all any wagon through doesn't want to keep room for, too, and so the leavings of half the Realms winds up in his three linked barns. You could hide in there easily, and scores of rats do. That's Lornatar's Leavings. Good place to buy a disguise—if your favored disguise is a junk-dealer.

"Which brings us to the cellarer. 'Preserved foods and spices from near and afar,' says the sign Sheleene Chathantra painted for herself, and that puts it perfectly; that's what she sells, that and the signs she paints. Does blazons for heralds, too; she's good. Keeps a clean shop crammed full of stuff I'd never think to find in Harpwood: pickled eyeballs from giant frogs from the jungles of the Shining South next to spotted Underdark slugs in sweet wine. And herbs from the far end of Faerûn next to spices from lands across the trackless seas. Nothing that's cheap, mind, but an astonishing selection for a place like this. Chathantra's Cellars, it's officially called, though she and four other ladies live there as a family, and they all work the shop and cook for each other and help with the sign painting—and make their own jams and jellies and preserved snails and the like, too.

"Most outlanders head first to the largest, grandest shop in Harpwood: Gathgar Locklar's Manywares Emporium. He's as loud and strutting and me-first highnose as lords it over any a dukedom, and presumes he'll be first, so I left him to last. If you can stomach all his preening and name-dropping and airs, he runs a big, clean shop of gleaming new everything—a little of this, and a little of that. A shallow selection rather than a good one: he has one sort of pan and one sort of pot, of elegant design, but if you don't like his choice, may the gods watch over you; it's whatever you can find in the Leavings or take yourself to a city for better shopping. Locklar bullies a large staff of young local jacks who can't find other work, and they'll run whatever you buy to your home or wagon, and load or set it up for you—but it'll cost you; Locklar isn't losing one copper at this that he doesn't have to. I can't stand the man, and neither can all the doxies he visits at The Antlers, nor any woman enough to become his wife . . . but the world needs all sorts to turn, doesn't it?

"The wagonworks. Everyone hereabouts is their own carpenter, but we have Skarl Hymrood for the big jobs. He takes his wagons to the Sunset foothills and cuts large timber, splits and dries it in his sheds—though, mind, the

"Harpwood" all the bards and minstrels raved over, that this place is named for, was all gone years ago. Hymrood and his seven 'prentices are our cabinetmakers and coffinmakers, and do their share of stools and ladders and tables and chairs, too, but they make most of their coin—and they make a lot of it, mind—repairing passing wagons. He has a huge collection of ready-made wheels, axles, pins, and chains in his back sheds, and I know caravan masters who depend on him and trust in him who order five-wheel sets made for themselves every winter, to pick up on their first run through in the spring. Man of his word, lives to work—but his 'prentices can party and chase the lasses to outdo some armies I can recall.

"Last of all, where the road ends in the trees past the tanner, lives our herbalist, Klaere Harskylar. Our local 'wise woman.' She's a healer and midwife, and the maker of what she calls 'cordials' and I call stronger spirits than I or even Elengarth up at the Antlers dare sell. A treasure, our Klaere; a kindly, caring mother to all, who keeps secrets and confidences, knows a lot about illnesses and when to send for a priest from Proskur or Easting, how to induce sleep or settle a stomach or quench a hangover or soothe grief or cast out pain with potions she concocts. She lives in a moss-roofed cottage so dim and cramped and crammed that you'd not find what you were looking for in it inside a day of hard pillaging without her help. Charges little, keeps sickbed-rooms and doesn't hesitate to fill them with strangers stricken with things that make others shun them; if the gods send saints to dwell among us, she's one, to be sure. Face like an old boot, husky voice like a frog's, but won't stint with hugs and soothing hands, or hesitate to climb into bed with someone who's chilled and teeth-chattering, to warm them. Lost her husband in wars years ago, but lives with her big, patient hound—or horse, some say; 'Horse' was his nickname, when he was a lad—of a grown son, Flaern, who happens to be our local Constable. He and his six companions, who were once the Red Dragonfangs adventuring band—with a charter from the Dragon Throne up in Suzail, and all—are the peacekeepers in Harpwood, our law and jailers. They keep a lockup on the main road, right across from Locklar's—and doesn't that put his high nose loudly out of sorts once or twice a tenday, too!—and they all live there above the cells except Flaern, but they're no local thickskulls, nor broken-down retired old boasters; they've fought and faced down full-armored mercenaries thrice their number. Fair and levelheaded in any fight or dispute, and having two sorcerers among them can't hurt, mind.

"And that's Harpwood. There are large, grander places in the Realms, I suppose, but this one's ours. Now are you snoring, yet, or do you want to hear any of the *real* gossip?"

There. That's how you make a small handful of people, and the place they live in, come alive.

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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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