

# Encounters in the Woods

## Charcoal-burners

by Ilja Steffelbauer

Charcoal, coal made from carbonised wood, is an important commodity in pre-modern societies. Not only is it a means of heating much preferable to mere wood, lighter, easier to transport and superior in sheer energy output, it is also the only means by which the high temperatures necessary for forging and smithing iron can be achieved. Ironworks, the smithies and other industries like glassblowing, smelting and foundering swallow whole woods within decades. But between the tree and the forge there is another step and this step involves the people commonly called charcoal-burners. Near any major settlement or mine – yes especially those operated by dwarves<sup>1</sup> – a wanderer in the woods is most likely to encounter these guys. The first thing one will notice is a smell of burning in the air and a distinct choking odour, stemming from the coal-gas that escapes the mounds and pits of the charcoal burners. Most likely he will also have noticed traces of lumbering and human presence by this time. If he follows his nose he will most likely reach a clearing or the edge of the woods after a while. There he will see a few earthen mounds, about the size of a small cottage and approximately the same height from which the smoke and the stench is issuing. Near them there will be a small shed or even a hut or proper house where the charcoal burners and their families may live. In most cases the men will be out there on their own with only a makeshift shed for shelter. They and their families will live in the next village or settlement and the charcoal burners will, for this very reason, usually know the way there. They will also have a few mules or donkeys or a wagon with a pair of oxen with them, which they will use later to transport the coal to its destination. If they are very poor a few baskets that can be strapped to a man's back will have to do. If they live in the woods expect a couple of poor cottages. If they are just here to do their work expect them to have the same kinds of things around your party is hopefully also carrying to survive in the woods – excepting the large amounts of pointy objects and assorted magical artefacts.

There will be about 3 to 8 charcoal burners depending on the size of the undertaking. One of them will keep watch all time. This is why it is not sensible to do the job with less than three men. Lack of sleep will soon erode the attention of the one on watch and this may doom the whole enterprise. The reason being that the earthen mounds mentioned before are not earthen trough and trough but only large stacks of wood and branches covered with a thin layer of earth. The earth is there to keep most of the air out. The charcoal-burner is interested in turning wood into coal, not creating a bonfire and most likely a major forest-fire soon afterwards. Therefore he has to keep watch over the mounds and regulate the amount of air allowed in by opening and closing small openings near ground level and on top of the mounds. This demands great experience and care and a certain "feeling" for what is going on inside the mound. A good charcoal burner can even doze away for a while. The change of smell or even the sound emanating from mound will warn him of any change. Charcoal burning is not a very exciting occupation. The party may encounter any stage of the operation. It starts with the men felling some trees and dragging them to the clearing. Then they will cut them into pieces and build their stacks. The way in which these stacks are built is very important and kind of a secret of the trade each charcoal burner will only reveal to his

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<sup>1</sup> Contrary to what many ill-informed people have spread amongst the masses, the coal found by the dwarves in the deepest mines is for some reason not applicable for foundering or smithing. It looks as if a curse lies on these black stones. Iron from foundries which employ stone-coal is brittle and useless. Alchemists have a name for the demon that is responsible for this devilry: Sulfur.

son or apprentice. Next the stacks are covered with earth and then a fire is started at some point. Next comes the long process of waiting and regulating the carbonisation of the wood. This may take some days, depending on the size of the stack. Up to this point the charcoal burners may still look human, if dirty and tired. The next step will effectively change this. When they are sure that all the wood has turned into coal, they will remove the earth and tear down the still smoking mound of coal. For this work the women and children may also be called in. The coal is sorted by size and quality – the big, hard chunks for smithing and other crafts, the middle ones and the small pieces for cooking and heating and the dust and tiny fragments for making gunpowder. For the latter high quality coal is required and it has to be refined later. There is also demand for coal made from special wood for special purposes like glass-blowing, alchemy or for making coals suitable for drawing.

In any case, the last step of the process will create sacks and baskets full of assorted coals that have to be moved to town by one of the aforementioned means of transport and a couple of very dirty people. Over the years the coal dust will fuse with the charcoal burners skin and lend a permanent black appearance to his feature – Every wondered who "the black man in the woods" really was? Luckily these people do not have to suffer this fate for long because the coal dust and the gas from the mounds is a sure way to kill yourself while still in your thirties. Anyway what remains if the black men move away is a clearing with a shed, traces of human presence and a number of oblong patches of scorched earth.

### ***The Game-use of Charcoal Burners***

For the GM the charcoal-burners may be just another encounter or background colouring for the campaign. The short article above is suited to prepare you for most silly questions about what is going on parts of the players. There are some special uses I would like to call to your attention though.

- 1) These men spend a lot of time in the woods. Night and day, winter and summer and they have a lot of spare time while their mounds are slowly turning into coal. They are bound to know the woods exceedingly well.
- 2) If 1 is true and the players are after something dark and sinister in the woods, then ask yourself: How do these men get along with "It"? a.) Do they know a way to protect themselves? Or b.) Are they in league with evil? The latter is by the way the opinion held by most people. I mean these guys go to the dark and sinister woods where no sane man would want to go in the first place and return from there unharmed! They have to be in league with (enter malevolent force of your choice here)!
- 3) If 2 a.) is true they have to be witches. Burn them!
- 4) If 2 b) is true refer to 3.
- 5) Now stop it! Our forges would go cold as well as our homes if we did that. We need those people. But for being offensively different we smite them with our contempt. Serves them right if they are doing a job normal people would not want to do!
- 6) The above statements will make it plain clear that charcoal burners, like the hangman, the undertaker and the slaughterer are discriminated against in a most unfair fashion. This makes them suspicious of strangers and reclusive, which is another reason not to like them. Adventurers are naturally prone to overstepping social boundaries and they may make fast friends with the charcoal burners if they approach them in a friendly way.

- 7) The remains of charcoal-burning make an excellent decoy. What created these large patches of scorched earth and is it still around?
- 8) You could buy charcoal from them.
- 9) You could ask them the way to the next village. They are bound to know it.
- 10) Dwarven charcoal burners make excellent encounters. Combine the natural dwarven disposition for grumpiness with the equally well developed distrust of the trade and you get an encounter out of which you may get not a single sentence beyond "Grmpf!".
- 11) An alternative way of charcoal burning are pits. In this case you dig a hole into the ground, fill it with wood and cover it over with earth. Then you start a fire in it. These pits make excellent ... pit-traps, burning included free of charge. Satisfactory results against undead and other monsters guaranteed.