

THE BATTLE OF SARN FORD

The Shire, April 1, SA 1700



Fibber Longburrow looked at the faces crowded around the trestle table. His real name was Frederick, but people had called him Fibber since he was small.

He took a drink from his tankard and lowered his voice. “It happened not more than a mile from this very spot. There I was, all alone in the forest, with nothing between me and the wild beyond but trees so ancient, they might of stood since before this land ever knew a plow.

“A clearing opened up just ahead of me. And what do you think was there? The largest patch of blueberries I’d ever laid eyes on in my whole life. And as far as I could tell, no one else had discovered it. Not a single berry had been picked. They were as large as grapes, and the branches sagged under their weight. I moved from bush to bush, dropping berries into my bucket as fast as I could pick them while Blue chased rabbits.

“By late afternoon, the sun was beating down pretty hard. I’d barely made a dent in that wonderful crop of berries, but

Uvatha the Horseman

even so, that bucket was just about full. I put it down beside me and picked a few more before packing up to go home.

"Something nuzzled against my leg. I reached down to scratch between his ears, where the fur was thick and soft. There was a tremendous barking, Blue shot across the far side of the clearing, hard on the heels of an enormous jackrabbit. My hand froze in mid-scratch. If Blue was way over there, whose ears was I scratching?"

Fibber paused and tapped his empty tankard. "Looks like I've run dry again." Bolly Toadflax dug a coin from his pocket and put it on the table. Missus Cowslip, the alewife, came over with a jug and filled Fibber's tankard. He drained the bitter brown beer she was famous for in a single draft, and held out his cup for another.

He wiped the foam from his mouth. "Where was I? Ah yes. It seemed that Blue was on the other side of the clearing barking at rabbits, so who's head was I petting? I was afraid to look, but ever so slowly, I lowered my eyes. It was a baby bear, with its face in my bucket eating up all my berries. I wasn't pleased, but the little guy was too small to be scary. Actually, he was a pretty cute. Then I remembered. Never, ever get between a cub and his mama. Just then, the largest, scariest, meanest mama bear poked its nose out of the brambles and headed right for me. What do you think I did?"

"Well, you still have Blue, so I guess she didn't eat him," said Bolly.

"And you haven't climbed a tree since we were little," said Robin Stitchwort, his neighbor.

"You're not much of a runner, either. No one in your family is," said Rusty Sourgum.

"And that was a problem." Fibber considered whether scaling a tree or outrunning a bear would make a better story. "I flew up that ancient oak as if I had wings. I do believe the lowest branch was ten feet off the ground."

Farmer Sourgum wiped tears from his eyes. "Alewife, pour him another round." The plump widow filled Fibber's glass until the foam overflowed the tankard and ran down the side. The bitter smell of hops reached his nose. Life was

The Battle of Sarn Ford

good. The elderly farmer slapped Fibber on the back. "You told that story so well, I almost believed you." Fibber's cup stalled halfway to his lips, not sure whether to be flattered or offended.

"Oh hey, look what I found under the blade of the plow this morning." Robin held up something black with an oiled finish. Fibber turned to look. The soil often yielded interesting things during the spring planting: broken pottery, buttons, bits of clay pipe.

Robin passed it around the table. Fibber turned it over in his hand. It was an iron coin, heavier than the humble coppers they used nowadays, and more finely made, a relic from an ancient time. One side showed a dragon perched on a castle, the other, a crown made from the blades of knives.

Fibber passed it to Bolly, and Bolly's eyes widened. "That's a goblin coin. Farmer Clydesdale plowed one up last year, about five miles north of here."

"There are no goblins in these parts," said Farmer Sourgum.

"There used to be. They say that before decent people farmed this land, it was crawling with goblins," said Bolly.¹

"They're still around. I courted one of them," said Bolly's nephew. Robin scowled at him. "Oh sorry, I'm forgetting she's your sister."



"Robin, you'll see him home, won't you?" The alewife shut the door behind them. The cold April air hit his face and startled him awake. Inside, the windows went dark one by one as the oil-soaked reeds were snuffed out.

They followed the great road south. It led them over the Sarn Bridge. The moon was almost full, its reflection bright against the glossy surface of the water. The silver light vanished in the shadows of the marsh grasses on either bank.

¹ The Shire was roughly 100 miles south of the ruins of Utumno, now submerged under the Bay of Forochel.

Uvatha the Horseman

The Brandywine was no more than knee deep here. It would be easy to wade across, yet the stone bridge was as wide and solid as the road that passed over it.

Fibber stopped at the center of the arch and looked at the black water flowing beneath. It was so peaceful here. Between the noisy confusion of family life and the hundreds of chores in a typical day of farming, he seldom had a quiet moment to himself.

“Who do you think built the bridge?” Fibber asked Robin.

“It wasn’t folks around here. They’d have just used rocks as stepping stones, or built something of wood for a wagon to go across.”

“It’s said there’s a great Elvish city to the south, and another on the coast. Perhaps the Elves built the road to connect the two.”

“Except no one’s ever seen Elves on this road.”

“They may have travelled this way long ago.” Fibber stared into the water, thinking about how to use it in a story.

“Come on, Fibber. Nothing’s going to happen down there, and it’s getting late.”

Fibber let Robin leave him off the bridge. They traveled south along the great road, then turned off onto a farm lane. It was a walk of several miles to reach the cluster of three farmsteads, a hamlet too small to have a name. The moonlight didn’t reach them through the trees, but they were headed towards home and the path was familiar.

The moon was high above the trees that encircled their small fields when Robin left him at his own front gate. Fibber stumbled across the yard where chickens scratched to reach the front door. Blue might have raised a ruckus, but he only thumped his tail.

Fibber pushed aside the flap covering the entrance to their cottage. Moonlight washed over the earthen floor. It’s gray-blue light revealed the pallets where his small children slept, the cot for his oldest son Tom, and the cradle beside the bed he shared with his wife. She snored softly, but not enough to wake the baby draped across her chest.

The Battle of Sarn Ford

Fibber crossed the room with careful steps, feeling his way across the hard-packed floor with his toes. He'd almost reached the bed without waking anyone when he tripped over the empty cradle and sent it crashing against the wall. "Plague and drought!" he cursed, hopping around on his non-stubbed foot. From the safety of his mother's arms, the baby drew a breath that seemed to go on forever, then let out an enormous shriek.

"Fibber, is that you?" Rosie's voice was thick with sleep. He struggled to hear her above the baby's wails. "How many cups of ale did you have?"

"Jush two. Ah ain't drunk." He dropped his clothes on the floor, then fell back against the pillow clutching the side of the bed as the room spun, hoping he wouldn't be sick.



Fibber stumbled back from the privy, his head pounding. The sun was completely up. If the eastern sky had been as pink and orange as it usually was when he got up, well then, he'd missed it.

He leaned against the withy fence around the pigpen and rested for a minute before going into the cottage. He started to sweat and bent over, waiting to be sick. Nothing happened, which meant he felt no better than he had before. He splashed water on his face from the trough, then looking to see that he was unobserved, cupped his hands and drank the water meant for the cows. It was cold and delicious. He smoothed his hair and went inside.

"Fibber, what took you so long? Did you milk the cow?" Rosie bent over the fire pit to stir the contents of an iron pot.

"Yes, love."

"Can you pour a measure of milk into the oatmeal? It's just about ready."

Uvatha the Horseman

"Oh, I meant to say, I was about to milk the cow. I'll do it right now." His cheeks burned. He collected the pail from beside the door and hurried to the barn.

He came back with a pail of milk filled almost to the rim, because he'd forgotten to milk the cow the night before. Rosie was standing by the pigpen.

"Fibber, the pig got loose." There were tears in her voice. The pig was half their wealth, and if they lost her, they might not eat very well next winter.

Fibber stiffened. "I'm sure I closed the gate. I remembered to check it when I came home last night, after you were asleep, and I'm quite sure..."

"She didn't get out by the gate." Rosie pointed to a hole in the base of the withy fence. "She found a gap and pushed her way out. What are we going to do?" Rosie stood there wringing her hands. She looked frightened.

Fibber gathered her up in his arms. "Don't worry, love, we'll get her back. Remember last fall, when we found her in that patch of wood what's thick with oak trees. Pigs love acorns. I'll take Tom and we'll go there first."

Tom appeared from around the corner of the house, a slender boy, but easily his father's height. He carried a rope in his hand, which he fashioned into a makeshift halter.

Rosie looked up at him, her eyes moist. "We can't lose her, Fibber. I can't imagine a worse disaster."



Fibber and Tom hiked along the narrow lane. They passed the farmsteads that neighbored their own, and beyond the clearings of their fields and gardens, the trees closed in on both sides. At one point, the path hugged the bank of the river. Sunlight sparkled on the surface of the Brandywine, just visible through the saplings growing on its banks.

After a few miles, the trees thinned and opened up on the great road, just ahead. There was more sunlight here, and white cow parsley grew on the sandy bank on either side of the path. A bee bobbed on one of the white stems, the flowers

The Battle of Sarn Ford

not fully opened in the morning chill. No wait, not a bee, a yellow jacket. Angry and aggressive, they were nothing like the gentle honeybees they kept in straw hives at the back of the garden.

On the side of the bank, two of them, three, no wait, half a dozen yellow jackets crawled from the unseen entrance to their nest. A low humming reached him, almost below hearing.

“Stay back.” Fibber motioned Tom away.

Why hadn’t he run into them before? He’d just passed this spot last night. Oh, because it was cold then, and the cold made them sluggish.

The trees ended, and Fibber stepped onto the great road. Overhead, the clouds looked unnaturally low, almost close enough to touch, and moving fast.

“Tom, what do you think of those clouds? They’re sort of greenish-looking, and too low. It’s not natural.”

“If it was midsummer and there was a thunderstorm brewing, you’d think nothing of it. It’s just early in the season for this sort of weather, that’s all,” said Tom.

Fibber walked to the middle of the avenue, the gravel sharp under his feet, and stretched his arms as wide as he could. Even if he were twice as tall, he still couldn’t have reached across its width.

The roadbed was level and flat, if somewhat neglected. Here and there, wildflowers dotted its stony surface. White clouds of cow parsley and thick-stemmed crosswort reached knee-high. Sow thistles, with blossoms like small sunflowers, grew as tall as his hip.

He looked to the South. A great plume of dust blocked part of the horizon. It looked like something large was on the move, maybe a whole herd of cattle. Now that would be a sight to see. But enough daydreaming, he and Tom had a pig to find.

“Tom, I’ve been thinking. We caught the pig in the acorn grove last time and there’s a good chance she’ll be there now,

but she might also be in the woods around our fields. Why don't we split up? I'll check the oak grove, and you search the woods closer to home."

Tom nodded and set off the way they'd come. Fibber watched until Tom disappeared among the trees, then crossed the great road in the direction of the acorn grove, three miles distant.



Fibber reached the middle of the oak grove late in the morning. Last year's acorns lay thick on the ground, so many that the woodland animals hadn't been able to eat them all during the winter.

There was no pig here. Fibber's shoulders sagged. And if she wasn't here, he didn't know where to look. He turned around. There were a lot of woods to search and little chance of finding her before nightfall. And dusk would come early today, what with that strange overcast.

Fibber left the grove. With any luck, Tom had already found the pig and taken her home. He forced himself to hurry.

He rounded the last bend and emerged from a stand of trees. There was a low vibration, something like the sound of drums. The great road lay twenty feet ahead of him. His mouth fell open, catching flies. Rank upon rank of soldiers marched up the road, ten or twelve abreast, spilling over onto the grassy shoulder.

They weren't human. Their skin was greenish gray, their features mutilated. Teeth like fangs protruded from misshapen lips, and many of them were hunchbacked. One of the creatures wore a necklace of teeth, and the unhealthy-looking skin of its face was pierced with gold rings that stretched the skin out of shape. The horrible thing looked at him, and their eyes locked. It nudged its neighbor and pointed. The other one noticed Fibber and laughed.

Fibber took a backward step, melting into the tall grasses the way a rabbit might escape a wolf. The safety of the forest seemed achingly far away. He fought the impulse to run.

The Battle of Sarn Ford

However, the monstrous creatures took no further interest in him, continuing to march without breaking rank. Apparently their discipline extended to not killing gawkers on the side of the road.

Beyond the acorn grove was the Greenway and the safety of Bree. But his family was on the far side of that dreadful column, and he couldn't bear to leave them. He dropped to his belly and crawled closer, peering at the road from behind a group of saplings. When his breath slowed to something close to normal, he climbed a small rise to get a better look.

The column reached south like a huge trail of ants, black and glittering with motion. Here and there, standards rose above the troops, black with a red design, unraveling at the bottom and stained with the dust of the road. It seemed to have no end. A rooster tail of dust rose high in the air against the horizon.

Their battle cry echoed up and down the line.

*Za durgbu snaku Mairon! Durgbu nazgshu, durgbu dashu!*²

The column marched on, driven by a relentless drumbeat. Each wore armor and brandished a spear or cudgel of some sort. Most carried shields, round with a metal stud, and every one of the creatures was dressed in black.

They rounded a bend and disappeared into the trees. If the creatures stayed on the great road, they would cross the Sarn Bridge and continue into the Shire. *Oh please, oh please just let them be passing through on the way to somewhere else. Just leave us alone.*

A group of horsemen road by, ringed by a guard of goblins who were taller and wearing more armor than the others. Behind the horsemen was the largest banner he'd seen so far, black like the others, with an intricate design in red.

Later, he saw a creature like a mountain of stone, its limbs as thick as the trunks of ancient trees, its features smooth and unformed. It looked too stupid to be a soldier. It had an iron

² "Hail Sauron, Lord of the Ring, Lord of the Earth!"

Uvatha the Horseman

collar around its neck, with a chain and handler. It stood upright, but may have been an animal.

By mid-afternoon, the last of the army passed by with the baggage wagons bringing up the rear. Then the broad avenue was empty, except for a cloud of dust hanging over the road.

Fibber climbed down from his lookout point and crossed to the center of the road. Not a single weed remained standing, and the grass on either side was flattened and dead. The road itself was torn up, rutted by wagon wheels and fouled with the droppings of their animals ... he hoped it was their animals.

To the north, the air still carried the pulse of the drum, and the stomp of booted feet still reached him through the earth. Fibber mounted the lane in the direction of home and took off at a dead run.



The forest closed in around him, except for occasional glimpses of the surface of the Brandywine. Where was Tom? Was his family safe? He had to reach them.

Tom ambled toward him along the path. "Dad? No luck?"

"We have to get home. I have to know that your mother is safe."

"Of course she's safe, I just saw her. I went to the house, but the pig hasn't come back on her own yet."

"Never mind that, an enormous band of goblins marched up the great road, headed for the Shire. Come look!"

Tom's face was still. "Does this have a punch line?"

Fibber grabbed the young man by the wrist and pulled him in the direction of the great road. They emerged from the woods at the point where Fibber first saw the black column. Dust was still hanging above the roadbed. The gravel had been worn down to bare earth in places, not a single weed remained. The grasses on either side were trampled and yellow.

Tom looked to his father, then back at the road.

"It looks like a herd of cattle came through here, a hundred or more."

The Battle of Sarn Ford

Fibber backed away from the road. "Tom, get back to the house. Take your mother and the children into the root cellar. Warn the neighbors, too." Tom shrugged, then trotted off in the direction of the farmstead.

When the path skimmed the banks of the Brandywine, Fibber let Tom go ahead while he stopped to catch his breath. Waves slapped against the banks. There were other sounds, faint and far away in the direction of the Sarn Ford. It sounded like metal striking against metal, and screams. Fibber stood frozen, listening. His own farm was tucked away in the woods, far from the Ford. His family was probably safe there, but even so, he started to run towards home.

Then much closer, a trumpet pealed and hoof beats thundered against the earth. There was a large thud. Someone howled, and someone else cursed.

Fibber wanted to go home. He wanted to know what just happened. He crouched low and crept back towards the road. The air filled with the sounds of horns and the clang of metal. The leaves had not yet filled out, and the outlines of pale horses were visible between the trees, and sunlight glinted from helmets and spears.

He moved from tree to tree, using the lay of the land as cover. When the trees gave way to tall grasses, he dropped to his knees and crawled on the ground. He reached the edge of the embankment, then parted the tall grasses and lifted his head.

The goblins were running, dropping their weapons, tripping over the dead. There weren't as many as before, not by half. Tall, slender warriors pursued them. Silken banners floated from the tips of their lances, decorated in the colors of wildflowers, and their curved swords reflected the light like mirrors. Each swing raised a spray of black blood which splashed their wheat-colored armor and stained their spears to the shaft.

Uvatha the Horseman

The pale warriors fell upon the goblins like a wall of destruction.

*Gil-galad! O galad-hremmin ennorath!*³

The battle cry seemed to terrify the goblins. One dropped his weapon and another tripped over it. He went down hard. In an instant, the slender warriors had caught him and hacked him into pieces.

In the middle of the chaos, a group of horsemen trotted south. Their armor and weapons were finer than he'd seen before, and their horses carried more saddlery and harness. They had a huge black standard, its edges ragged and pale with dust. A band of foot soldiers encircled them, evenly spaced and all holding their spears at the same angle. It was the only group he'd seen so far that hadn't broken rank.

Hoofbeats thundered on the ground, and a wedge-shaped formation of Elvish warriors bore down on the black horsemen. Their leader was an enormous warrior who carried a blue shield bearing a pattern of stars. Behind him, a standard bearer carried a banner with the same device.

The warrior shouted something. It must've been an insult, because the largest of the black horseman stopped in his tracks and wheeled around to face him. The people surrounding each of them fell silent. The black horseman pulled a sword from its scabbard with a hiss, and advanced in slow, menacing steps. The soldiers surrounding him stepped aside to get out of his way.

The pale horses danced around, moving away in back. They tossed their heads, whinnying, as their riders fought for control. Only the leader's horse remained still, except for a twitch that ran up its haunches.

The black horseman spoke, his voice low and harsh. The Elvish leader stiffened, his mouth a thin, hard line, and his fingers tightened on the hilt of his sword. One of his companions laid a hand on his arm, but he shook it off. They were like two dogs circling one another, hair stiff on the back

³ Starlight! From tree-tangled Middle Earth!

The Battle of Sarn Ford

of their necks, fangs bared, a low growl deep in their throats, blind to anything but each other.

Something moved. On the far side of the road, a goblin archer knelt on the top of a spur of rock. He notched a barbed arrow and drew it back to his cheek. Now he was sighting along the shaft, about to loose it at the Elvish leader, whose eyes never left the black horseman. He wasn't aware of the archer, and his own people were watching him, so they weren't aware of him either.

Fibber had to do something. Warn them, create a distraction, anything. He felt in his pocket for the sling he always carried. The archer was too far away to hit, but maybe he could warn the Elves. He looked around for a target that would make a noise. Anything metal would do, a helmet, a shield, the breastplate of a soldier.

But before Fibber could act, the archer let out a shriek and tumbled from the rock, his hands clutching the shaft of an Elvish arrow lodged in his throat. He hit the dirt with a dull thud and lay face down, the black blood soaking into the ground beneath him. The elvish shaft snapped when he hit, the feathered half-end with its ragged wooden splinters lay beside the body. Fibber's breakfast rose to his throat.

The heads of both leaders snapped to the fallen archer. The black horseman shouted at the Elven warrior and made a hand gesture that wasn't very polite, then wheeled his horse around and galloped south, his mounted guard packed around him. The goblin foot soldiers stayed behind and formed a line across the road, where they knelt and planted the butts of their spears in the ground. The Elvish warriors dismounted and advanced on them, swords drawn.

Fibber had had enough. He withdrew as carefully as he could, and when he was sure they couldn't see him, he turned and ran. He crouched in the underbrush beside the path. The sun had come out again and warmed the afternoon air.

Uvatha the Horseman

He watched the road through a screen of saplings. There were skirmishes of twos and threes on each side all up and down the great road. Right in front of him, two elves advanced upon a goblin, which screamed and fell, clutching the calf of its leg. Its fellows scattered. Two of them fled and escaped into the lane in the woods.

No, that can't happen. My family is at the end of the path.

Fibber drew the sling from his pocket. With his eyes fastened on the goblins, he felt around in the sandy soil for a smooth rock and fitted it to the pouch of the sling. He swung it over his head once, twice, and released. The range was too great, the stone struck a tree behind the lead goblin. The next stone was much larger than the first, too large for the sling. But no matter, they were closing in too fast. He didn't have time to make the shot.

There was a humming sound nearby, and something stung him on the knuckle. Yellow jackets floated above the ground, vigorous and excitable in the afternoon warmth. He hurled the stone against the sandy bank as hard as he could, right on the spot when the yellow jackets were thickest on the ground, the entrance to their nest. A cloud of them filled the air. Something stung him on the ear and on the back of his hand. He bit his lip and didn't move.

The lead goblin stopped in his tracks, hopping up and down and flapping his arms, backpedaling to get out of there. The other one ran into him and knocked him down, but he was on his feet in an instant and running back the way they came. Both were screaming something that was probably goblin for "Bees, bees, I hate bees!" Apparently they were more afraid of yellow jackets than the murderous Elven warriors waiting for them on the road.



Fibber reached the edge of his lands, an eye swollen half shut, chest heaving, his hair glued to his forehead with sweat. The little ones were playing in the garden. One had uprooted a day lily and was hitting his sister with the stalk. In the next

The Battle of Sarn Ford

field, a neighbor walked behind a plow. No one was in the root cellar.

Tom put down his hoe. "Guess what, Dad? Robin found our pig digging in his kitchen garden and brought her back. She was safe in her pen when I got home." He pointed to the pen, where the pig grunted over a pail of slops.

Fibber staggered into the cottage. Inside, Rosie balanced the baby on one hip and, with her free hand, stirred something in a cauldron on the fire. The room smelled of chicken broth and warm bread.

"Rosie love, you won't believe what I saw. A huge hoard of goblins tried to enter the Shire, but a pack of Elves appeared out of nowhere and drove them back."

Rosie's face was still. "And I suppose Tom saw it too?"

Tom stiffened. He looked from his father's face to his mother's, and back. "Oh hey, I'd better repair the withy fence before the pig gets out again," then shot across the room much faster than his usual relaxed pace. The cowhide flap dropped shut behind him.

Rosie shook her head, then turned back to the hearth. "Really, Fibber? You can't do better than that?"