

# The BATTLE OF THE THIRTY



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**I**n picturesque Brittany there stands by the roadside, half-way between the little towns of Ploermel and Josselin, a small obelisk, which bears this inscription:

"A la memoire perpetuelle de la bataille des trente, Que Mgr Le Marechal de Beaumanoir A gagee en ce lieu l'an 1350."\*

The stone on which these words are cut formed part of an ancient, weather-beaten cross, which had stood sentinel by the highway for many a long year, until it was supplanted, in 1819, by the present monument.

The cross itself had but marked the spot where, two hundred years before, a giant oak tree reared its knotty trunk and stretched abroad its mighty branches, until, smitten at length by age and infirmity, it fell to the ground.

Until 1775 the cross had borne no inscription, but was known to the peasantry of the country round as the "Cross of the Battle of the Thirty."

In that year, like its predecessor, the oak, it fell to mother earth, but, more fortunate than the tree, it was set up again and another stone added to it bearing the inscription above recorded.

Now the famous oak tree whose existence was commemorated by the stone cross, which in its turn was commemorated by the obelisk, had, according to all tradition, formed the rendezvous or trysting place where, on Saturday, the 27th of March, 1351 (now style), thirty combative Frenchmen and thirty equally pugacious Englishmen met to settle their differences by the then fashionable method of trial by battle.

A fight of some kind was an everyday occurrence in the Brittany of those times. The feud between the widowed Countess de Moutfort and Jeanne de Penthiere, wife of the captive Charles of Blois, was carried on by those warlike dames and adherents with great spirit.

Now, it chanced that Sir Thomas Dagworthy, a noble Englishman, connected by marriage with King Edward the Third, had been killed in a skirmish with the followers of Charles of Blois.

He was succeeded in his command by one Sir Thomas Bembrough, and so vexed and grieved was this Sir Thomas at the death of his friend that, according to the poet, he swore by his patron saint he would certainly have his revenge.

Setting to work without loss of time, he proceeded to annex the neighboring lands, to ravage the country, and, as a crowning effort, to capture the small fortified town of Ploermel, which "he filled with weeping and misery."

These outrageous doings roused the gorge of Sir Robert de Beaumanoir, a valiant captain of Brittany, in the service of Charles of Blois. Accompanied by many knights and men-at-

arms—for he held a considerable command—he set out for Ploermel in order to induce Sir Thomas, if possible, to amend his ways.

The interview between them was highly unsatisfactory. Beaumanoir had been greatly excited by the sights which met him on the road—unfortunate peasants loaded with chains, or tied together by the thumbs—and he was by no means in a mood for calm discussion. "Cavaliers of England," he said, "ye are much to blame in thus tormenting the poor peasants who till the soil and furnish us with abundance of wine and cattle; and thereto ye are neglecting the last commands of Sir Thomas Dagworthy, who ordered that the peasantry should not be maltreated. Let them, therefore, henceforward, have peace, for of a surety they have suffered enough."

To this compassionate appeal Sir Thomas Bembrough made a very rough answer.

"Hold thy tongue, Beaumanoir," said he, "and let there be no more question of this thing between us! Moutfort shall be Duke of the noble Duchy from Pontorson to Nantes; and Edward shall be King of France in spite of all the French and of all their allies!"

"Dream some other dream, Bembrough," replied Beaumanoir, "for in good sooth this is but ill-dreamed, and will never come to pass. And now, if it please thee, let us deal with one another like men, and fix a day to fight together with sixty, or forty-five, or thirty companions on either side, so that it may appear plainly, without further talk, who is in the right and who is in the wrong."

"Sir," answered Bembrough, "so let it be. I am well content, and thereto I pledge my word."

And thus it was arranged that on a day fixed they should proceed to a certain spot, each with thirty combatants, there to argue out the matter in, as it was then considered, the most satisfactory manner—that is to say hand-to-hand with lance, sword and dagger.

On reaching home, Beaumanoir hastened to summon around him the warlike gentry of the neighborhood.

"Seigneurs," said he, addressing them, "know that Bembrough and I have agreed to choose thirty warriors of the most approved valor, and skillful in the use of sword and lance, to fight together for the right."

And he went on to give them a full account of his recent interview with the English baron. The adventurous knights and hardy squires of Brittany were delighted with the proposal, and received it with acclamations.

It was just in the spirit of the rough but chivalrous times in which they lived, not a man present but was eager to make one of the thirty. But Beaumanoir, a wise commander as well as a gallant soldier, knew exactly the men on whom he could rely, and made his choice accordingly.

Among the most prominent of the warriors selected may be mentioned the Sieur de Tinteniac, Yves Charruel, Guillaume de Montauban and Geoffrey du Bois.

The band comprised the flower of the Breton chivalry, and Beaumanoir remarked that "if he were not much mistaken they would defend themselves gallantly against the felon Bembrough."

Sir Thomas on his side chose his men with equal care, and, if the poet of the time is to be trusted, some very remarkable warriors were included among them. Thommelin de Belifort, for instance, who was accustomed to do battle with an iron mallet weighing five and twenty pounds; and a certain Hacheton de Clamaban, who fought with a kind of scythe, sharpened on one side and furnished with spikes, or hooks, on the other.

"The blows," said the chronicler, artlessly, "which this gentleman was in the habit of dispensing with his sweet weapon were usually mortal."

It is not surprising. Sir Robert Knolles and Sir Hugh de Calverley, two celebrated English soldiers, were among Bembrough's thirty, as also was a gigantic German man-at-arms, named Croquart, whose valor was equal to his inches.

In all there were twenty English, six Germans and four Brabançons in Bembrough's party, so that three nationalities were represented. Both sides included in their ranks knights, squires and men-at-arms.

On the appointed day the Englishmen and their allies proceeded on horseback, armed cap-a-pie, to the place of meeting, which was marked by a magnificent oak tree, called, from the ground where it stood, "Cheane de ni voie."

Arrived there, they dismounted, and, being first on the ground, awaited the coming of their foes. Soon the glitter of steel was seen upon the highway, and the Frenchmen rode up, pennons fluttering, plumes tossing, helmets shining, in all the pomp of chivalrous war. They also alighted from their horses, and ranged themselves on foot opposite their adversaries.

Before the fight commenced, Bembrough had a short conference with Beaumanoir. He desired, it was said, to postpone the conflict, in order to obtain the consent of Edward the Third.

Beaumanoir, however, after consulting his comrades, insisted that the battle should take place immediately, as had been arranged.

Bembrough acceded to this, and the conversation then degenerated into mutual recriminations.

"My men have all sworn," cried Beaumanoir, winding up a fine piece of gasconade, "that every one of ye shall be taken captive and bound before the hour of complines,\* and they will keep their oath!"

To this Bembrough, not to be behindhand, replied that he valued neither Beaumanoir nor his cavaliers at as much as a clove of garlic, and that, in spite of him and all his might, he would render himself master of Brittany and the whole of Normandy.

Then, turning to his followers, he shouted: "Seigneurs, the Bretons are in the wrong!

Upon them! Put them to death! See that none escape!"

At that the sixty warriors rushed upon each other. The first shock was terrible, and the result all in favor of the English. Yves Charruel was taken prisoner, one Frenchman killed outright, and two severely wounded.

One of these, Tristan, a French knight, was being dragged away by the English, when he called aloud to his leader:

"Where art thou, Beaumanoir? Rescue me from the English, I pray thee, who are bearing me off, wounded and helpless, or I shall be lost to thee forever!"

Beaumanoir cried out that before that happened many a swashing blow should be given and taken, and many a lance broken, and, rushing to his aid, began to lay about him heartily with his huge two-handed sword.

However, in spite of his efforts and those of his followers, the English obstinately refused to give way, and the combat became every moment more deadly.

"On both sides," says the chronicler, "they fought like lions."

But these strenuous exertions, combined with the weight of their armor and the heat of the sun—for it was a warm spring day—began presently to tell upon the combatants, and constrained them to relax their efforts.

Weak and faint grew their strokes, making no impression whatever on steel helmet and coat of mail, and indeed their exhausted arms could barely wield the heavy lance and the ponderous battle-ax.

It happened then that in the very midst of this ferocious struggle a halt was called, literally, "for rest and refreshment," and the weary warriors flung themselves down on the green turf, the English on one side, the French on the other, and refreshed themselves with the good wine of Anjou, of which each man had carefully provided a bottle.

When they rose to their feet to renew the conflict, two Frenchmen lay stretched dead on the grass, and three had been taken prisoners, while of the English two also had been placed hors de combat.

Just then a picturesque and characteristic incident occurred. Geoffrey de la Roche, a French squire of ancient and noble family, requested to be admitted to the higher order of chivalry, and was dubbed knight by Beaumanoir on the field of battle.

He was exhorted to show himself worthy of his spurs, and to fight as his ancestor had done at Constantinople. As may be imagined, the young knight rushed eagerly into the thickest of the fray, with a burning desire to distinguish himself.

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\* "To the eternal memory of the battle of the thirty, which Monseigneur Le Marechal de Beaumanoir gained on this spot in the year 1350."

\* The last day office—i. e., religious ceremony—of the Catholic Church, following immediately after vesper.