

and cultivated, and all taxes collected. And there was some struggle brewing between two religious factions... Thomas dreaded most of all going on to see his father, but he couldn't put it off any longer.

When Thomas thought of his father, what came to mind was a long-ago birthday, Thomas' sixth. His father had just given him a short sword. As Sir Robert buckled it around his son, he had explained in his precise way, "There are three states of humankind to which a person may belong. Listen, and remember this.

"The first estate is the clergy; it comprises the priests and nuns who pray for our souls and keep all people in the way of salvation. The clergy includes the monastic clergy like Friar Paul and the secular clergy like Father Gregory.

"The third and lowest estate is the peasantry, whose task is to work the land and feed all of the people. Peasants are weak by nature and must be governed, kept in the way of justice, and protected from natural disasters and invaders.

"The second and finest estate is the nobility, to which you were born. The duty of a noble is to protect all the people and to administer justice."

The word "protect" had kindled in Thomas the hope of a dragon, and he had asked, "How, sir,

how should we protect the people? Where is the enemy?"

Sir Robert, who always had an answer, had said, "For some years now, no enemy has attacked us here at Thornham. But there are still many enemies in the world. The worst are the enemies of Christianity, the heathen Moors who try to tear the world away from God."

Thomas grew up learning the skills of a fighting man, and all the while he had pictured the enemy as a dark-faced Moor. Tilting down the field toward a post with a helmet on it, he would shout, "Take that, Muhammad!" and knock off the imaginary enemy's head. Fighting with some towheaded farm boy, he would mutter, "Die, Saracen," as he cornered his adversary and drove him to the ground.

Confessing to Father Gregory had made him remember what they'd done. People here at Ramsay still called it a Crusade. As if Thomas had gone straight to the Holy Land and crossed swords with Saladin himself. As if he, Thomas of Thornham, shining with the light of righteousness, had dealt a blow to evil, some wicked, swarthy heathen.

Crusade. War in the name of a cross.
I was taken in, thought Thomas, stunned by his own stupidity, stupid sheep that I am.