

And here I am, back in the hills of home, quaint as a prayer-book painting. No job. No wife. If Ramsay were a painting, I would rip it to shreds, throw it in the fire.

The thought brought a sort of backwash in Thomas: he loved Ramsay—its impatient people, its stubby fields.

Let people believe I'm a hero. They won't think it for long. Let them enjoy the fairy tales in their own minds.

I'm the one who is bad.

He stared at the bright green grass poking up through the dark mud at the creekside.

Grass and mud are real. Grass and mud are beautiful. I should throw my body back into the earth, snuff out my own badness. Make the Ramsay grass grow greener.

At first, the Crusade had been everything he had hoped for. After a joyful gallop across France, Thomas' little band had joined knights of many nations who had answered the call of the Pope. They lived for excitement, encounters with new people, languages, ideas.

They lived by their swords. And there was no organization, no idea as to how these fighting men should be used.

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"Turn back," they were told. "The Crusades are over. Acre, our last bastion in the Holy Land, has fallen."

"Wait," they were told. "The Pope wants a new Crusade. True Christians will not accept defeat."

"But King Louis is dead."

"Yes, and so is Saladin."

"The Muslims have never been stronger."

"Is that a reason to quit?"

"Wait. Believe. Be ready. You will be needed."

They were drawn into political skirmishes by petty kings. They became mercenaries because they had to eat, hired killers trying to believe in the causes of those who paid them. Some pillaged and stole in the name of God. Some became involved in the blood wars against the Albigensians, killing at the command of the Church entire families who held a different view of Christianity from that of the bishops. Many became drunkards in their shame—violent, armed drunkards.

One night, in a dream, Thomas had found himself galloping down the tilting field at home, aiming his lance at the "Moor's head" that always stood on a post at the far end. He galloped faster and faster, in wild excitement. He steadied his arm and knew triumphantly that he would hit the head straight on. At the last moment, he saw that the Moor's

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