

## Two Sons

In January 1945, as Hitler's war was drawing to a close, a farmer's wife in Thuringia dreamt that her son at the front was calling her and, on going out into the yard dazed with sleep, she fancied she saw him at the pump, drinking. When she spoke to him she realized that it was one of the young Russian prisoners of war who were working as forced labour on the farm. A few days later she had a strange experience. She was bringing the prisoners their food in a nearby copse, where they were uprooting tree-stumps. Looking back over her shoulder as she went away she saw the same young prisoner of war – incidentally, a sickly creature – turning his face with a disappointed expression towards the mess-tin of soup someone was handing to him, and suddenly his face became that of her son. During the next few days she repeatedly experienced the swift, and as swiftly vanishing, transformations of this particular young man's face into that of her son. Then the prisoner fell sick; he lay untended in the barn. The farmer's wife felt a rising impulse to take him something nourishing, but she was prevented by her brother who, disabled in the war, ran the farm and treated the prisoners brutally, particularly now that everything was beginning to go to pieces and the village was beginning to feel afraid of the prisoners. The farmer's wife herself could not close her ears to his arguments; she did not think it at all right to help these sub-humans, of whom she had heard horrifying things. She lived in dread of what the enemy might do to her son, who was in the East. So her half-formed resolve to help *this* prisoner in his forlorn condition had not yet been carried out when, one evening, she came unexpectedly upon a group of the prisoners in the little snow-covered orchard in eager conversation, held in the cold,

no doubt, to keep it secret. The young man was there, too, shivering with fever and, probably because of his exceptionally weak condition, it was he who was most startled by her. In his fright, his face now again underwent the curious transformation, so that she was looking into her son's face, and it was very frightened. She was greatly exercised by this and, although she dutifully reported the conversation in the orchard to her brother, she made up her mind that she would now slip the young man some ham-rind as she had planned. This, like many a good deed under the Third Reich, proved to be exceedingly difficult and dangerous. It was a venture in which her own brother was her enemy, nor could she feel sure of the prisoners either. Nevertheless, she brought it off. True, it led her to the discovery that the prisoners really did intend to make their escape, since each day, with the approaching Red Armies, there was greater danger that they would be moved westwards or simply massacred. The farmer's wife could not refuse certain requests, made clear to her in mime and a smattering of German by the young prisoner, to whom she was bound by her strange experience; and in this way she let herself be involved in the prisoners' escape plans. She provided a jacket and a large pair of hand shears. Curiously enough, from that time on the change no longer occurred: she was now simply helping the young stranger. So it was a shock when, one morning in late February, there was a knock on her window and through the pane she saw in the half-light the face of her son. And this time it was her son. He wore the torn uniform of the *Waffen S.S.*, his unit had been cut to pieces and he said agitatedly that the Russians were now only a few kilometres from the village. His homecoming must be kept a dead secret. At a sort of war council held by the farmer's wife, her brother and her son in a corner of the loft, it was decided first and foremost that they must get rid of the prisoners, since they might have caught sight of the S.S. man and in any case would presumably testify to their treatment. There was a quarry not

far off. The S.S. man insisted that during that night he must lure them one by one out of the barn and kill them. The corpses could then be dumped in the quarry. Earlier they should be given some rations of alcohol; this would not strike them as too odd, the brother thought, since lately he, as well as the farm-hands, had been downright friendly to the Russians, to put them in a favourable frame of mind at the eleventh hour. Whilst the young S.S. man expounded his plan, he suddenly saw his mother shudder. The menfolk decided not to let her go near the barn again in any circumstances. Thus, filled with horror, she awaited nightfall. The Russians accepted the brandy with apparent gratitude and the farmer's wife heard them drunkenly singing their melancholy songs. But when, towards eleven o'clock, her son went into the barn, the prisoners were gone. They had feigned drunkenness. It was precisely the new, unnatural friendliness of the farm people that had convinced them that the Red Army must be very close. The Russians arrived during the latter part of the night. The son was lying drunk in the loft, while the farmer's wife, panic stricken, tried to burn his S.S. uniform. Her brother had also got drunk; it was she who had to receive the Russian soldiers and feed them. She did it with a stony face. The Russians left in the morning; the Red Army continued its advance. The son, haggard with sleeplessness, wanted more brandy and announced his firm intention of getting through to the German army units in retreat to go on fighting. The farmer's wife did not try to explain to him that to go on fighting now meant certain destruction. Desperate, she barred his way and tried to restrain him physically. He hurled her back on to the straw. As she got to her feet again she felt a wooden stake in her hand and, with a great heave, she felled the frenzied man to the ground.

That same morning a farmer's wife drove a cart to Russian headquarters in the neighbouring hamlet and surrendered her son, bound with bullock-halters, as a prisoner of war, so that, as she tried to explain to an interpreter, he should stay alive.