One

When the train pulled out of the great echoing hall of Zurich Central Station, gathering speed as it travelled eastwards along the shore of the lake, Professor Adler knew that he had passed the point of no return. He was committed, he was going back. As long as the train had been standing in Zurich he could, he told himself, have got out. There was the platform, just under the window of his sleeping compartment, there was even a porter, looking up expectantly at the two large suitcases and the coat and hat hanging on the brass hook opposite the long, narrow red plush seat. It would have needed only a tiny gesture, or just a smile, and the man would have been with him, hauling down his luggage, speaking to him in the guttural intonation and sing-song inflexion of Swiss-German, which he had not heard for so many years. Adler kept his eyes fixed on his suitcases, and the urge to stretch out his arm was very great. For a few concentrated seconds he was deeply conscious of his freedom of choice. Then, at the instant when the mounting tension became almost unbearable, the train gave a jolt and began to move. He sat down again. He was alone in his compartment, a second-class one designed for two, but the train was not full, and he had had it to himself ever since he had boarded in Paris. It was only a short time ago that long-distance rail services into Central Europe had been re-established and not many people were travelling.

Adler sat by the window and looked out at the flat shore of the Zurichsee and then, as this receded, at the meadows dotted with apple trees and the neat farm houses with gabled roofs, sliding past with increasing speed. The suitcases were still in the rack above his head. His sense of freedom to do as he wished, and the accompanying tightness

in his chest, had left him. Instead he felt like an automaton, like a piece of machinery that, a long time ago, had been conditioned to behave in a definite way, to carry out certain instructions, and was now doing so, mechanically, according to plan. At the same time his mind was quite clear and able to reason about it, to maintain that he had all along been, and still was, a free agent.

He could, of course, have got out in Zurich. It would have been perfectly plausible for him to have undertaken the long journey from America in order to go there. He could have gone to call on an eminent colleague with whom he had corresponded about their different methods of studying the structure of certain molecules in a type of hormone cell. It would have been quite obvious to everyone concerned that he wished to have a live discussion with Professor Schmidt and to observe his laboratory work at first hand. If his wife happened to have told anyone that he was on his way back to Vienna, it would be clear that she had misunderstood his intentions, or willfully distorted them. Their closest acquaintances knew that he and Melanie were barely on speaking terms and that she had been bitterly opposed to his going. So, if she had denounced him to her friends for having deserted her – crazy, irresponsible, sentimental she had called him – and for having set out to go back to that ‘little hole of a country that had turned them out’, well, he could say that he had never meant to go there. He had come to Switzerland to see Professor Schmidt.

But now Zurich was left behind. He had not got out, so this explanation of his movements had become untenable. Or had it? The Arlberg Express in which he was sitting would not stop again until it reached Buchs, at the frontier. But Buchs was in Switzerland, on this side of the Rhine; here only a little river that formed the actual

boundary between Switzerland and Austria. He could get out in Buchs if he wished and wait for the next train back to Zurich. No one would know. And even if they did – why would it matter? He had been deep in thought about the chemical structure of certain secretions and had not noticed when they got to Zurich, and all of a sudden he found himself in Buchs. That's what he would say. He was an absent- minded professor, the kind that hunted for his spectacles while they were still on his nose. Then he smiled at himself. He was really being ridiculous! Who was he arguing with, who was he trying to convince? He was not accountable for his actions to anyone, to anyone in the world. Not even to Melanie. Or least of all to Melanie. She had never understood him or made the slightest effort to do so. She had no insight into his feelings, and would not take any notice of them if she had. Since they had been in America, Melanie had made a life of her own, setting herself up as a corsetière and making a tremendous success of it. Suddenly the rather nondescript, meek-looking little woman who had been his wife had discovered in herself a stupendous ability for business. She had started making foundations to mea sure, to special order, and women had flocked to her; first to the tiny living room of their little flat in a shabby Upper West Side street, now to her elegant salon in uptown Madison Avenue. He had been very grateful to her at first, she had made it possible for them to make a start in New York; for it had taken a long time before he was earning even a modest salary and had secured an appointment as assistant pathologist in a hospital sponsored by a Jewish foundation.

That was a thing that had taken him completely by surprise – this virulent anti-Semitism rampant in so many walks of American life, even in academic, even in medical, circles. He had scarcely known it in Vienna. Of course, it had always been endemic there,

but in such a mild form that one had almost been able to forget about it, until the threat of Hitler made it loom huge and terrifying. He had not been prepared for it in America, where, although there was no danger of physical extermination, there was an ever-present insidious consciousness of it, like a suppressed toothache which one could never quite forget. But it had no place in politics or in business, and Melanie flourished entirely uninhibited. Gradually she drew her clientele from the more fashionable and, in the end, from the most exclusive society, and treated women whose names were stars in the social register with blatant familiarity. They did not, of course, invite her to dinner, but she got her satisfaction out of them by unashamedly humiliating them in her salon, especially the not-so-young and the not-so-slim who were the majority of her customers.

'Take off all your clothes, please, Mrs Water house. I can't make you a foundation unless I can see what I've got to build on. Yes, everything please, the slip and the bra – what a dreadful bra! No wonder you look as if you had a bolster on your chest. There! That's better. It's the body itself I have to study.' And the poor woman would stand up in her nakedness, shivering in spite of the temperature of the room, which was tropical even in winter, while Melanie walked round her appraisingly, making derogatory comments. 'Not quite a Venus, are we, Mrs W? But there, we can't all be bathing beauties, not when we're getting on a bit. And we all do, it comes to all of us. Well, that's why you come to me, isn't it? You wouldn't need me if you were trim and slim. You're my bread- and- butter with all your little disfigurations, so it's not for me to find fault with them is it? It's my job to remedy them, that's what is expected of *me*. And Mr W isn't Adonis either, I don't suppose, so who is *he* to complain? The left hip is rather thicker than the right, isn't it? And the left breast. But we'll even that out, and smooth

away the bulk just above the waist. Now, I'll take the measurements myself, here we are. We don't want any unnecessary prying eyes, do we? And I do all the fitting, my assistants only work on the garment itself. Very well. First fitting a week from today.' And then she would quote some astronomical price, and her client would remonstrate: 'Really, Mrs Adler, I was told you were expensive, but I was given to understand –'

'I'm sorry, Mrs Water house, but yours is a very difficult case. Of course, if you prefer to abandon the project – I never force myself on anyone, even if I have studied my subject.' Then, having submitted to the ordeal, the order is given, and three weeks later Mrs Water house is beaming with delight. She feels so comfortable, her couturier congratulates her on her figure, her clothes simply glide onto her and she moves with undreamed-of ease. So the next half-dozen clients are advised to go and see 'that awful woman' who makes such heavenly foundations that it's worth submitting to the worst indignities in order to possess one.

This was what Professor Adler was remembering – and not the structure of hormone cells – when the train began to slow down as it approached Buchs. One day, when she was in a playful mood, Melanie herself had given him this description of a typical interview with one of her most stiff-necked clients. At the time she had told him about it, it had nauseated him: it was not, perhaps, the situation itself, which he might have found comical, but the relish he saw in his wife's face as she described it, which had sickened him. Melanie was making a lot of money and good luck to her – if she could command such high prices for the excellence of her products. But in her gloating over the humiliation of her customers she was humiliating him too. A nerve of moral fastidiousness in him revolted against this behaviour, against her very person. He had

become aware that the increasing luxury of their surroundings, their furniture, their food, his wife's and his daughters' clothes, was being paid for with money thus come by. Certainly, his own contribution to their way of life must have become proportionately ever smaller.