

MOUNTAIN SOLITUDE

NOTES OF SUMMER DAYS ¹

By CHARLES GOS

IT was early morning at Ferret. In the chapel a young priest who was staying there was holding a service for himself and a small shepherd boy ; for me too, before he ended. As I went out the boy was pulling at the bell-rope. The bell rang out, clear, frank, silvery, as if he were ringing for the flowers outside.

On the way down I met the young cows (in the local patois, *génissons* or *modzons*) going up from La Neuvaz to their summer pasture at Plan Lachaux, on the move, as they say here, *la remointze*. The creatures were wild with joy, the whole herd in a fever of excitement, and the youthful queen of the herd walked proudly at their head. The bells sounded a joyous peal. A cloud of dust rose into the air and a warm smell drifted down the road.

In the twilight of evening, as I sat resting on a big stone below the La Fouly cow-sheds, the herd came home. It looked like a procession of huge black ants. There was a perfect storm of bells. One of the cows in the act of drinking at the trough espied me ; by the way she stared at me I might be anything from a nigger to a white elephant ! Then two more, half a dozen, fifteen of them fixed their great eyes on me. It became embarrassing, almost beyond a joke, especially when the bull, a sturdy broad-shouldered fellow with straight, pointed horns, joined in the study of my person. Luckily one of the herdsman turned up. Just then a distant rumble as of thunder rolled through the valley. A great piece of the Dolent Glacier went crashing down the rocky slopes below it. A moment later, from the vault of turquoise blue carved in the grey wall of ice, a stream burst out as blood from a wound.

A surprise for me this morning, a herd with chiming bells high up in the Combe des Fonds ! The mists were very low, and just beneath them patches of snow, huge fallen rocks, a rushing stream, a few stunted pines growing here and there on one side of the Combe. A herdsman in an old blue military cloak was leaning on his staff, with his dog beside him. There were *génissons* all round me. The herdsman's eyes were fixed on the Col du Petit Ferret, where, high up, I could see a black point moving. Were they truant cows or smugglers ? Followed by the dog, the man went off to meet whatever it might be descending.

¹ Our sincere thanks are again due to Mr. R. L. G. Irving for the translation of this article.

Two of the cows followed at a distance in his tracks, as curious as he. The herdsman turned round, saw them just as they were crossing a broad snow patch, and pointed them out to the dog, which dashed after them. A brief but glorious tumult ensued, the two cows pursued by the dog tearing wildly about over the snow, with tails in air. I settled myself comfortably with my back against a rock, to watch what might emerge from the mist. Actually, it was a couple of herdsmen, piloting in brotherly manner a velvet-black calf which trailed one of its hind legs. The truant had slipped off on its own and got badly bruised by a stone while wandering about in the mist. When they rejoined the herd, one of the men milked a goat into his hat and offered the injured calf a drink. But it turned its head away. They gathered a handful of grass and choice flowers; even this was refused. Then they set off again hobbling slowly along, the *modzon* still between the Good Samaritans and lowing pitifully. Its solitary little bell kept tinkling in the fog, growing fainter and fainter, till presently it ceased.²

In this high Valaisan valley there is only one breed of big beasts, 'la race d'Hérens' (the *ens* pronounced as if *in*). The cows are small sturdy beasts, sinewy, intelligent, pugnacious, with magnificent horns, their coats uniform in colour from ebony black to pale golden brown. While the big herds are occupying the pastures far above the valley, the more modest herds of *génissons et modzons* are feeding down below. Above them, the glaciers are revelling in the sun and fill the whole landscape with the mysterious splendour of their presence, and at the very top of that icy summit nearly 4000 metres high, three frontiers meet in peace, shaken only by the storm-wind, about the beryl-tinted cornice of snow. Out of the quiet valley comes the pastoral music of the herds. A shepherd with a trained ear catches every note: in this chorus of clanging bells, antiphonal or unison, in major or in minor key, he can pick out at once the sonorous metal hammered on the anvils of Chamonix, Courmayeur or Liddes. These *sonnettes*, as the bells are called here, are a considerable attraction to thieves. Last year, some smugglers on their way home thought they might as well add to their bales of tea and coffee fifteen or so of these fine bells. So

² I had news recently from a shepherd about the truant *modzon*, and some details about the death of the young 'queen.' The wounded *modzon* had been taken down to Orsières in a cart, lying comfortably on a litter of hay, and was doctored in the stable there. It is now convalescent and beginning to move about the fields, still limping badly. It will teach him not to play any more pranks on his own with fog and stones about. As for the young 'queen' who had died, she was defeated in battle the very day before the *désalpe*. These small cows of the *race d'Hérens* are intelligent, sensitive creatures and suffer from reactions that may fairly be called emotional, quite abnormal. When a 'queen' is defeated, it is necessary, so the shepherd at the La Fouly alp always maintained, to talk to her, explain things, and make much of her. If, once she has been petted, she remains in an attitude of settled gloom, the only remedy, if you do not want her to die from a stroke, is to bleed her. In this particular case the herd of *génissons* was sleeping in the open and the herdsmen had just got back to their hut when the fight took place. The result was that this young 'queen' got none of the usual consolation, nor the bleeding that might have saved her, and preferred to die rather than survive the bitterness of defeat.



Photo, Émile Gos, Lausanne.]

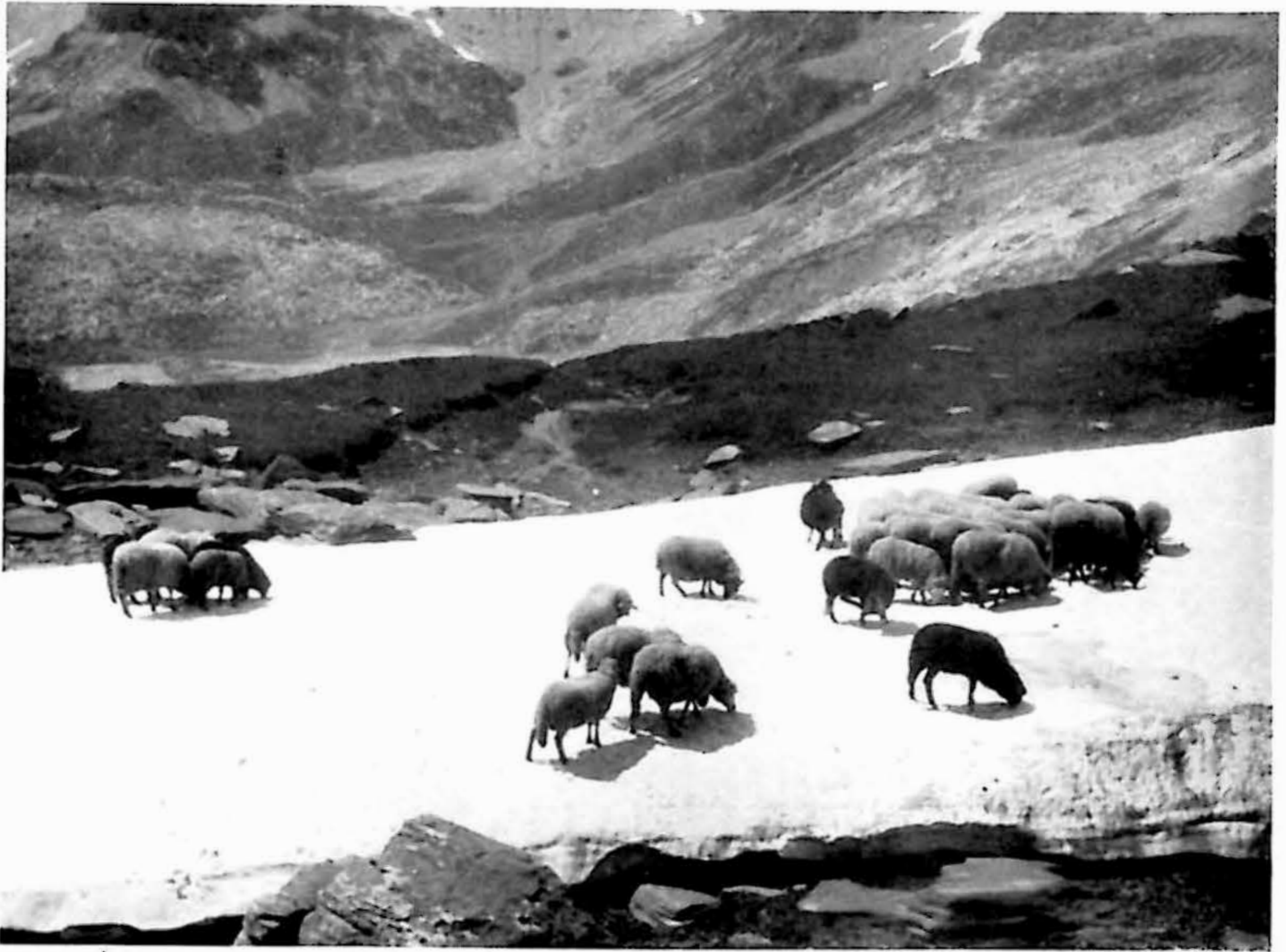
THE TOUR NOIR, FROM THE PASTURES OF LA FOULY.



Photo, Émile Gos, Lausanne.]

PASTURES IN EARLY JULY.

[To face p. 112.]



Photo, Émile Gos, Lausanne.]

THE REALM OF SOLITUDE.



Photo, Emile Gos, Lausanne.]

AFTER THE DÉSALPE.

they quietly removed them from some guileless *génissons* who were sleeping in the open, a pinch of salt being sufficient to ensure the complaisance of the innocent victims.

I pushed on as far as the huts of Les Ars-dessous. They were silent and deserted, the big cow-shed abandoned, the fruit store locked and empty. That bench you see there, against the wall, was the bench where my father sat last year when, after finishing a rough sketch, he took out his violin and played old Valaisan airs to the shepherds seated round him on the grass. The cows were still up at Les Ars-dessus, and I could hear their innumerable bells as they swung in the wind, and the herdsmen calling. The solitary crucifix looked down upon the flowers. As I left it behind me, I passed the entrance to the hut or *grenier*, which is used as a cellar. The door was open. A great panier for carrying heavy loads was lying there beside a jacket and an aged hat. But not a soul was about. I sighted rows and rows of fine cheeses and cubes of *sérac*. A shrew-mouse, hardly bigger than a match-box, scuttled across the boards. She stopped and eyed furtively this strange apparition of a human being. Finding me harmless, she awaited my approach, licked herself over, scratched her ear, got on to a stone, sneezed, came back again, and at last, as my heavy boot was but a few inches from her frail form, she beat a retreat behind some enormous cheeses. I could only wish her good luck with her meal and be off myself.

Every now and then, as I sit writing at my table by the window, I look up from the page and take up my field-glasses, which I always keep handy on the dictionary. Very high up, just below the Glacier du Mont Dolent, I spotted the herd of *génissons* from La Léchère, scattered on a green hillock. About five o'clock the sky began to cloud over quickly. I picked up the herd once more, then took up my pen again. Almost before I had time to fashion a sentence, clouds swallowed up the Tour Noir and seized the high bastions of the glaciers. Hullo! here was something exciting. What was happening to this herd of mine? The herdsmen were evidently anxious. The one above began to drive the beasts down the steep slope. I could see the *modzons* appear on a ridge where the clouds were already breaking in white foam. Now they were coming down, in a slow procession. Suddenly there was a crash of thunder behind the Dolent, and the floodgates of the sky were opened. The rain passed in thin streaks across my field of vision. The mists were now lower. I chose a few landmarks, two snow slopes and a big waterfall at the back of the hollow, where the herd was descending. I penned a few more lines. The rain was lashing down, and thunder rolling from peak to peak. The tail end of the procession had disappeared in the mist; I could see terrified cows careering all over the place. And now the mist had swept over them too, the waterfall, the first snow slope, half the cattle vanished. An eagle sailed across, but at the moment I barely noticed him. The whole sky was aflame with each flash of lightning, and the thunder echoed

incessantly like rapid fire. The heavens had become black as ink. As the second snow slope passed into the mist, my last landmark was gone, and with them the whole herd. Just for one second I saw the tiny shadowy form of a cow on a grassy ridge, all blurred and vapoury, then nothing but a wall of fog and cataracts of rain, without a hint of what was going on behind.

I know one person who was nicely taken in this morning ; that was myself ! I had gone off very early, with my glasses slung over my shoulder, to prowling about in the immense forest which spreads its sombre green below the chain of the Echessettes from La Fouly to Orsières. My ambition, let me hasten to add, did not go beyond the immediate surroundings of La Fouly, where lie the great avalanche hollows, frequented by chamois above and by roebuck below, with an occasional stag wandering up from Praz-de-Fort.

The meadow was still in shadow as I went up. A bird flitted round me in agitation at my presence. A man up here at this early hour can only be an enemy. Hardly bigger than a humming-bird, it kept perching on the flowers to revile me, then diving down into its nest in the grass, then popping up again on a flower. The pensive columbines hardly deigned to bow beneath its weight.

Leaving the meadow, I struck into the path which leads into the heart of the forest, still haunted by the shades of night. As I entered, the cow-bells from the La Fouly alp, which had been faintly tinkling one by one far up the hill, seemed to come nearer. I walked along delicately, my glasses ready in my hand, hoping to surprise the deer. As I moved further in, the bells rang louder. I told myself, the cattle must be on their way to the clearing below the first hollow, and I moved cautiously, listening intently. Oh, damn these bells ! A conspiracy of silence was the one thing I desired this morning. Hark at them. Bim, boum, bim, badaboum, boum, badabim, and yet again, rebadaboum, rebadabim. I was for it, this time ! The whole lot must be following me and entering the forest ; there was but one track, and the cows, with their lord and master, were after me. Under the leafy covering the bells made a dreadful din, like cataracts of noise pouring down everywhere, from the mountain tops, from the heads of the tall shaggy pines and from the low shafts of sunlight passing lightly, like a fabric of woven gold, over the blue haze of the valley. At this clamour, breaking the silence of morning, every roebuck in the place, every fawn and stag and chamois must have fled for refuge to the thickest cover or to the safety of the heights.

I was furious at this ruin of my plans. As the din drew nearer, having no wish to remain in the line of this bestial avalanche, I felt it wiser to withdraw promptly to some safer spot. A low rock of no great height close to the path was just what I was looking for. From this perch I faced the bronze thunder that was rolling towards me beneath the trees. Here comes the 'queen,' a dusky beauty, with a *toupin* as big as a chalet, then her first followers, brown, black, flame-

coloured, burnt sienna, finely horned. A herdsman hurried up to the head of the column, shouting hoarsely. But the queen saw me and stopped, and the rest followed suit. A complete traffic block! The herdsman turned in amazement to see his ten leading beasts with craning necks, noses tilted and ears pricked, staring hard at this Vishnu blessing the sacred cows. But for the herdsman it was more a matter of *sacrées vaches*, and with a hail of stones and whacks he cleared the path for traffic. Soon the main body was filing past me, a long business, for there must have been about a hundred beasts. I watched the huge slow undulating frames, each lowering its head and showing its splendid sharp straight horns. As the bull went by, a very dark, quiet, powerful brute, Vishnu crouched low on his little rock. The procession tailed off into the laggards, the pensive, the inquisitive, the scatter-brained or the greedy, bearing with them the last echoes of the brazen storm. But as for discovering those deer of mine in their silent haunts this morning, not a hope!

As twilight began I went up towards the glacier. The whole hollow was full of dark mist. Very high up, just below the clouds, a few sheep were scattered over the russet slopes of Six-Niers. I could hear one small cracked bell chattering in the cold. I met the old *garde-chasse* who was in search of wood. We had a talk about the solitary chamois of La Maya, a wild and ancient buck who knows the shooting season to a day and trots off accordingly from his feeding-ground. Now that the season was over, I had hopes of seeing him. When the keeper had gone, I searched in vain with the glasses. Then the clouds descended. Ragged edges of mist shut out the hillside till soon there was nothing to be seen. As I turned back, an oval vent opened in the mist above the glacier, and through it I caught sight of the jagged tops of the séracs at its edge, a sombre grey amid all this blackish smoke. Just for a moment something emerged from the gloom far up, at the foot of a white slope: a huge bergschrund, broken at regular intervals where avalanche channels spread their powdery loads in a frieze of symmetrical cones. Then the clouds closed once more. Night was at hand.

The other day I witnessed a duel in the herd of *modzons* at the chalet of La Vis, between a 'queen's daughter' and a proud young bull, who was beginning to fancy himself a bit. His advances were distasteful to his little friend of royal blood and she lost her temper. She went for him properly, her small horns banging into his ribs, his flanks, his belly and his head. Surprised at this reception, the lover defended himself. But the queen's daughter was now thoroughly roused, and pushed him back, her forehead against his, a good score yards. Then she began her flank attacks again. And now a third delinquent was drawn into the fray. This poor inquisitive *modzon* found himself caught between the two combatants just as the small queen was lunging, and took a mighty buffet in the ribs, which sent him flying; he scampered off dumbfounded, wondering what it was

all about. Needless to say, the young bull slipped off under cover of this lucky intervention. So the 'queen's daughter' was left alone in the ring, breathing battle, her eyes flashing at all and sundry of her young companions, who gave her a wide berth.

Is it the end of summer or the beginning of autumn? Nature has her own sure signs of transition from one season to another. One sign is the early snowfall borne by the first chill winds, a white sprinkling on the summits, which melts directly it touches the valley floor. These snows spread upon the upper grassy slopes a pale combing of wool, blending with the subdued russet brown of the slopes and iron grey of the walls. The chamois are coming down to graze, the black, glossy-plumaged choughs have left their summer haunts upon the tops and fill the valley with their long shrill cries, tracing strange arabesques against the sky. They settle in the fields, awkwardly hunting the grasshoppers, yellow beaks and yellow legs dabbling and hopping about. The marmots have got in their hay and completed their fast, 'so as to be empty during their long sleep,' as a shepherd explained to me, and now they have gone to ground for the winter and sealed the entrance to the hole with a good yard of solid earth. When they next poke their noses out of doors the glory of spring will have come back again to these hillsides. Soldanella, sulphur anemone and gentian will have come out like stars upon the grassy slopes. Even the water in the mountain stream has changed imperceptibly, in volume, in colour, and in its note. It is all but transparent, the merest hint of turquoise in it, a delicate ashen blue, an ice-cold stream chanting faint hymns. Far above, where the snow has melted on the glaciers and the sérac barrier stands, or on the massive walls of grey ice, where the dying glacier clings to the polished rocks, there appears a pure greenish blue and a dead whiteness never seen in summer; as if the ice were purified and burnished by the gentle warmth of fine October days.

Yesterday, it was good-bye to the alps, the *désalpe*. On that date, invariably September 20, there is a general exodus from all the alps. Six big herds come through this small hamlet, their 'queens' proudly leading, the *reine à cornes* displaying a broad red girdle and scarlet ribbons on her brow, the *reine à lait* a broad girdle of white. Once the tempestuous music of the bells has stopped, the valley enters again upon a peace to which these first days of autumn add a note of sadness. Better than any calendar can do, this exodus and the close of the short chamois-shooting season mark inflexibly the end of summer in these mountains. The moment the alps are abandoned by the cows, they are invaded by huge flocks of sheep from the highest grazing grounds. Any bit of grass the cows have left is cropped clean by the invaders. And when sheep reign here, the reign of solitude begins.

A number of open-air sheepfolds have been put up round this hamlet; one of them is close to my chalet. At daybreak, which is about six o'clock, the shepherds open them and the beasts emerge, a medley of

broad woolly backs, white, beige, brown or black, like a Persian carpet unrolled. Almost every night lambs are born, trembling things on spidery legs, fussed over by their bleating mammas, while the new-born babies answer with a feeble whine. Foxes come at night, and occasionally even in the daytime, and steal them from the mothers. Not long ago, *Prince* the black, tailless sheepdog strangled a fox that was lurking about after a lamb. When they are but two days old the lambs start off for the hills with the flock, never leaving the mother's side. One of the ewes gallantly charged *Prince*, drove him off and charged him again when he came too near her baby. Two rams are fighting in the road. I can hear their heads crashing together, like the blows of a woodman's axe in the depths of the forest. Even the blood gushing from their nostrils cannot restrain their fury. One of the shepherds has just come in at the end of the morning with a pair of black lambs in his arms. They had been 'dropped' on the way up to the hills and he was bringing them into the fold, followed by their bleating mamma.

As I pushed back my shutters this morning, squalls of snow were bringing white into the grey landscape. All day there has been snow and rain, wind and mist. Four young Italian smugglers came in 'to load up.' In the low eating-room of the inn, packets of biscuits, tea and coffee were piled high and presently disappeared into huge sacks of packing-cloth, to be slung over the shoulders. The men set off again when twilight came, in foul weather, with a thick fog enveloping the passes. I watched them going off, with their backs bent beneath the great bales. Each of them carried a stout alpenstock, and in addition there was one ice-axe (*le pic*, they call it) for the party in case of trouble with a possible bergschrund below the col on the far side. The leader had his shirt-sleeves rolled up high and was playing a mouth-organ. They soon melted away into the fog.

Snow is falling steadily, in thick flakes. It is the end of summer.