

'Bad' Winters in Patagonia

by 'Calafate' [Robert Riddell]

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To the Magellanic and Southern Patagonian sheep-breeder a 'bad' winter ? a heavy layer of snow which for months refuses to melt ? means hard times for all. For the manager, overseer, shepherd and peon ? literally all hands but the cook ? it entails gruelling rescue work, while to the flocks of suffering sheep it brings gnawing, freezing misery and the dread menace of a lingering death from exhaustion or starvation.

Yet, to the old hand there never again will be a 'bad' winter. Should a couple of metres or fathoms of snow fall tomorrow and lie for a year or two, the old hand might concede that the winter was a trifle severe, but, after all, seasonable, though, of course, nothing to what a 'bad' winter used to be in the old days, say 1899 or 1904, when starving horses denuded one another of every vestige of hair from mane to tail, there being nothing else to eat. In their desperate effort to obtain sustenance they gnawed through doors, window frames and all exposed woodwork of the shanties, to the intense discomfort of the inmates. The sheep also consumed every particle of their fellow-sufferers' fleeces; some died frozen stiff in an upright position, and, when the snow ultimately cleared away, the highest trees were festooned with the carcasses of animals which had browsed off the tree-tops ? an eloquent indication of the depth or height of the fall.

Yes, even making due allowance for 'Old Timer' mendacity, winters were occasionally pretty 'bad' in the old days; but this is a description of the 'bad' winter which may be experienced in the less spectacular present and was actually experienced in the not so remote past.

1913, in the delectable district of Last Hope, Straits of Magellan, was the writer's first experience of Nature's too frigid salute. As usual, it came as a thief in the night, but, unlike that of the nocturnal marauder, its visit was of long duration, for it maintained its icy grip on the territory from late April until late September. Ordinarily, heavy snow seldom falls before May or June, so no one felt particularly nervous that in the latter part of April a large number of sheep should still be up on the high mountain pastures, extremely dangerous ground in winter. But the unexpected happened: in the leaden calm of an April night large feathery snowflakes began to fall. Before midnight there lay about nine inches 'on the level,' and by morning this had increased to over fifteen inches, while still more was falling, and continued to fall for a further thirty-six hours. A strong freezing wind sprang up, the thermometer registering more than 20° C. below freezing point, and altogether it looked as if the snow would lie long and deep. This was on the lowlands in the beach neighbourhood; no one dared venture an estimate of what lay away up in the wooded heights and /vegas/, where

most of the sheep were pasturing. There might be very little more, but certainly there would be several feet of snow in some parts, where it was driven by the wind. It turned out that while an average of rather less than two feet lay below, in the high camps there was seldom less than three feet.

On the farm's property 50,000 to 80,000 sheep might be partially or completely enveloped ? snowed in and in danger of immediate suffocation or lingering starvation. As always on these occasions, the telephonic advices were by no means reassuring; neighbouring farms appeared to be in similar straits, while each section overseer was more pessimistic than the other, and their S.O.S.'s for assistance simply overran themselves along the wires. To judge from their reports, in most cases it was impossible to bring in the riding horses, and, even were this accomplished, the snow would be too deep for travelling; any horse would soon tire in the drifts. Further, if one did manage to get about on horseback, what in the name of Creation could one do for the sheep! The snow was too deep to admit of their being moved. After thirty-six hours' steady fall, to the Boss and his Second (whose chronicle this is) the situation seemed to be nearly hopeless; both were at a loss. They felt that perhaps there was little that could be done; but inaction was out of the question. Yet, where to go first! In this huge tract of forest, scrub and mighty hills there were at least a dozen points that ought to be attacked; thousands of sheep corralled in the snows must be forced down the cruel ravines to the lower tracts, where at least they would have a fighting chance of surviving, and this must be done before the snow hardened. Then there were the cattle ? 14,000 to 15,000 of the poor brutes. Most were already in the low-lying scrub, as safe a camp as any, but nearly 3000 were isolated in remote parts, where already lay three feet or more of snow. No one could get near them; so the cattle must be left to work out their own salvation; the cow-men would attend to them later.

Had the snow waited another forty-eight hours things would have been less critical. Already, on the very day on which it had commenced, the mustering gang of shepherds had set out for the Ventana shanty to round up the sheep and bring them down. Now these men would be snowed up, and there was no cut grass for their horses. It was really tough luck. How they were to scale those high forbidding //cañadon/s/, a hazardous undertaking at the best of times, Heaven alone knew. But here were 40,000 fat sheep imprisoned and the Freezer Factory awaiting them. If they were not brought down and slaughtered according to plan they would die in the snows. If they were brought down too late or too thin to be accepted by the freezer, it meant that a lingering death in store for most of them, because all the available winter pastures were already heavily stocked. So it was decided that the Ventana should be attended to first.

Immediate orders were issued to the two /campañistas/ (horse-wranglers) to fetch in their troop with every available horse, pack up stores and get away to the Ventana shanty without a moment's delay. The thirty or forty horses immediately available must serve as remounts, and also, until more were sent, be used to break a track on which the sheep might travel down. The head shepherd was to bring out what he could by the

Valle Prat and send a couple of men to the freezer with each mob that was rescued. He and his gang must remain working there so long as one sheep remained, or until further orders. The Boss and his Second would tackle the Ventana with the Dos Lagunas horses, working from the other end, the Tres Pasos /cañadon/ ? that is, if they could make their way up those precipitous rocky defiles.

"But, señor," expostulate the /campañistas/, "how are we to get there? The thing is impossible; we shall be lost, overwhelmed by the snow."

"Oh, you jolly well must get there. These sheep must be got out."

So the battle was committed! The troop of horses did get to the Ventana shanty, and, after a fortnight's exhausting effort, the gang succeeded in bringing down the bulk of the imprisoned sheep from their lofty trap by way of the Valle Prat /cañadon/. Yet the stiffer and more critical attempt had to be made at the other, the higher, northern end, where there was a considerable number of sheep in jeopardy, quite inaccessible to the main gang working from the other extremity. And there were only two men available for this: the Second and his colleague ? a redoubtable partner indeed.

Their journey from the main settlement to the Dos Lagunas Section, which was to be the expedition's jumping-off point, ordinarily an hour and a half's canter, entailed a whole day's plunge through the snow, painfully tiring to the horses. Next morning, mounted on two fresh horses, from whose noses hung two icy moustache-like blobs, they made a determined effort to reach the fateful Ventana by the most direct route.

From below one could see the summit that must be scaled, the famous, or infamous, Devil's Punchbowl. The bald ridge did look forbidding, being covered deep in a heavy white mantle, everywhere swept by the woolly puffs that meant icy, choking wind-blasts. A steep ascent of four or five miles led through the sheltering evergreen trees, where fairly good progress could be made. Then, as height was gained, the tall timber gave place to nasty twisted scrub, and the going became more difficult, making it necessary for them to scramble along on foot, leading, or dragging, the reluctant horses.

At last the summit was reached, and here was an inferno of wind-swept desolation. Just on the ridge most of the snow had been blown away, but in the steep ravine, which must now be followed downwards, it seemed to be any depth. Once one slid down that incline one might not strike bottom; and how [to] get back? Also there were four or five miles of this sort of stuff to negotiate!

A tentative try almost finished the expedition at the outset. A led horse, after putting up a desperate opposition, was induced to venture forward a couple of yards and was all but engulfed, sinking deep down in the crisp, powdery morass. It was hauled back, and the expedition, now almost played out, took a breather and reviewed the situation. There was only one thing to be done ? go back.

"Nothing doing, Alfred. Back we go; but tomorrow we must find another

way up by Tres Pasos (a neighbouring farm). We'll have to cut their fences, because they cross the best //cañadon/s/, but we'll apologise afterwards."

At daybreak the tiny relief expedition pushed off on its 'trespass' through Tres Pasos. The snow on the flat was fairly deep, but one could plough through pretty well, and a promising gully was selected for the ascent. Thank heavens, Tres Pasos had not some officious shepherd nosing round!

The /cañadon/ was a godsend. It offered a gradual if narrow ascent, and luckily there was not too much snow; it was exposed to the full blast of the westerly winds, which had swept it. Thus the snow was not more than fifteen inches deep, except for frequent heavy drifts that had collected in the cross-gullies.

"We are quids in, Alfred; we'll travel Indian file so as to make a bit of a track to bring the sheep down on. We'll get there all right this time."

The /cañadon/ emerged on the Break Neck, a narrow gorge walled by perpendicular rock rising sheer to a great height. Its top ledge overlooked this abysmal bottle-neck, and was the only possible outlet from the Ventana basin, stretching away to the south in dreary perspective. All other means of exit appeared to be drifted up and impassable. Everything was a dead white or glacier-like blue, except where the beetling cliffs were too steep to hold snow, while the encircling heights were capped by the winds' powdery flurries. The deceitful sun shone tantalisingly on a superb spectacle, all too pregnant of coming disaster, for its rays were blindingly bright but ineffectual.

A few hundred yards away was a dark blob like a dirty coffee stain on a wide expanse of immaculate table linen. This was the first cluster of huddled, starving sheep, and as far as the eye could see were similar blurs where the flight of the struggling animals had been stemmed by the inexorable snows. These were the only signs of life except for the mournfully garbed condors, looming unnaturally huge against the monotonous white setting; it was too high and exposed for the lesser scavengers, such as the Carrancho hawk. Of condors there were quite a number; one, perched on the edge of the Break Neck, gazed round incuriously until his disturbers were within a few yards of him, when he slid lazily into space, to float majestically away without any perceptible motion of his outspread wings or the slightest flicker of his plumage. Others, perhaps a dozen of them, their black shapes clearly silhouetted against the transparent azure of the sky, were hovering over the desolate scene for all the world like large planes observing the remnants of a confused and stricken army; an effect not unlike controlled artillery fire was afforded by the smoky flurries raised by each isolated group and picked up eagerly by the driving wind. Certainly it seemed as if these useful undertakers, the condors, need not go hungry for many a long day.

"We'll make for the first mob, Alfred; we'll bring them along, and if

there's time we'll go back for more and drive them over the same tracks."

Not so easy as it looked; there were fully three feet of snow, and one had to approach the stranded animals by a route that would make possible their ascent up the steep escarpments, breaking a track all the way so as to give them a lead. There was many an involuntary plunge into smothering drifts before the huddled group of a thousand or so was reached. About twenty of the nearest were cut off, and the dogs were called into action.

"Speak up, Jock: shove them along, Fanny." And to the eager barking of the dogs the twenty leaders, now an animated snow plough, were chivvied forward in halting but ever renewed advances, leaving a track by which their companions might be induced to string along.

"Now we'll give them a breather and go back for the main mob." And so by short laborious hops, always changing the leading phalanx as it became exhausted, the long straggling column wound its way in a narrow ribbon, bunched at the rear end, until it reached the head of the /cañadon/, that providential Khyber Pass to salvation.

As it was passing along the edge of the Break Neck the too eager bustling of the dogs affrighted a trio of sheep, causing them to disappear over the edge in a flurry of snow. But all three did not go right down to the bottom: two left a short trail into nothingness, but the snow had supported the third on a ledge only a yard below. It could not, however, possibly get back unassisted, and if not rescued must soon follow the other two. At present all it wanted was just to be left in peace, to be freed from the harrowing dogs barking querulously from above but instinctively fearful of following.

"We must try and yank the stupid blighter up; call the dogs off and I'll try to grab him."

He lay prone and wormed himself to the cliff's edge directly above the nonchalant animal; the rock was quite firm, but the sensation was nauseating. Too recklessly he reached down and made his grab. Getting a firm grip of the wool, he began to work his way backwardS, dragging the sheep up with him. He expected it to come quietly, but it struggled and recoiled as soon as it felt the pull: this affected the would-be rescuer's balance, and for one ghastly instant he felt himself slipping. He let go his hold on the sheep, and for additional purchase dug both hands into the snow. He closed his eyes, sick with dread. Was he going over? Fearful of making the slightest move that might provoke a fatal slide, he remained for what seemed an eternity in this ridiculous posture. At last he felt that he was holding his own, and carefully, inch by inch, he worked himself back away from danger. Then he arose, feeling decidedly groggy, very cold but yet perspiring.

"That was nearly a knock-out, although you didn't notice it. We'll have to rope it."

A noose was improvised with a halter, and the unappreciative animal was hauled out of danger.

Now there was no time to go back for more sheep; this mob had to be driven down through another man's property : in another hour it would be dark and it would take seven or eight hours to reach Dos Lagunas. Also both men were all but frozen, and, in keeping with the senseless usages of the day, disdained to carry any food. They decided to start off with the sheep they had, and it was midnight before they reached their destination and could be released.

"We'll turn in now and start away tomorrow first thing for the next lot."

Thus the work went on for many days. Sometimes a thousand would be collected and brought down; or perhaps a couple of hundred, or even none at all. Sometimes the work would be comparatively easy; the top surface of the snow, softened by the sun's rays during the day and frozen during the night, would be hard enough to travel over. At other times a shrieking wind would cover up the tracks so painfully fashioned on the previous days, or there were fresh falls of snow ? an almost insurmountable handicap. Ultimately all but a few odd stragglers were saved. Instead of being starved or frozen to death in the snows, they were reserved for a more philanthropic unselfish end; for, a few days later, they met their fate at the Freezer. Icily calm in their little white shirts and still beautiful in death, they were transported to the fleshpots of London, /via/ Smithfield Market.

In the lower camps things were not too good, but there was little to be done, as the stock was all properly distributed. One could only leave the animals to scratch for their own livelihood. Before the snow finally disappeared these had undergone a very effective course of slimming, their diet having changed from the succulent grasses to the indigestible twigs and leaves showing above the surface.

The Second retains in his mind's eye the picture of an emaciated steer played out and lying down to die, while a desperately ravenous old ram, its hind feet braced on the steer's shoulder and its front feet resting on a branch, stretched itself erect, in order to reach the leaves of a tree that had already been denuded of its lower foliage.

In the cattle section the situation soon assumed every aspect associated with dire disaster, not so much because of more adverse conditions, but because of the utter incapacity of the half-tame cattle to rustle for themselves when a cruel winter blights their accustomed pastures. Surely there never was created a more helpless creature; under unhoused grazing conditions it is liable to succumb to want and cold like some tender tropical plant. A horse has an efficient row of incisors ? top and bottom ? and will resolutely paw the snow and ice, nuzzling down to reach the hidden feed that will save it from starvation. The sheep, although it has incisors only on its lower jaw, will also scrape steadfastly, persisting though its feet be raw and bleeding from previous efforts. Its teeth are sharp; it gets close to the ground and will not succumb without a struggle. But cattle! well, perhaps they are only meant to subsist where, literally, feed can be thrown at them, unless, like the North American bison, they have never been the object of human interference that has deprived them of their fighting powers.

The semi-domesticated bovine is practically unequipped for the fight against the rigours of exceptional winters. Its teeth are blunt, only on its lower jaw has it incisors; its hooves are cloven, while its soles are not much thicker than brown paper. If it gets on to a sheet of ice its legs will sprawl out in four different directions, and then it is finished ? involuntarily it does the splits. Also, and this is a more calamitous trait, it will not scrape for sustenance, and therefore, under hard conditions where other quadrupeds will contrive to subsist, it goes hungry. As long as it is warm and well-nourished, it is endowed with every attribute of bellowing and hot-blooded courage, but in the face of adversity its fortitude evaporates completely. What a month earlier may have been a dynamic, homicidally inclined, four-footed avalanche will wilt abjectly when the ground is held by the first layer of snow and ice; the personification of shivering, unreasoning misery, he hunches up, takes an occasional pull at what vegetation protrudes above the surface, becomes discouraged and goes into a rapid decline.

Still, there they were more than 14,000 of them. This bovine army formed part of the pioneering scheme to break tracks and firm up the virgin country; later the cattle would make way for hosts of the more profitable sheep. Before the advent of winter the cattle camps had been overstocked; now the snow lay deep, and everywhere was desolation. The usually kindly, leafy haunts were soon converted into a vast battlefield, except that the casualties were non-combatants who had surrendered at the first grim onslaught of wintry nature. The scene of their martyrdom was undeniably beautiful, the foliage draped in scintillating, snowy crystals that reflected the rays of a sparkling sun; but, nevertheless, it was a Fairyland of Death. Dotted here and there were ominous powdery mounds, a horn or hoof projecting ? whited sepulchres of suffering creatures that had lain down to die.

All was hushed, silent except for the occasional raucous croak of the Carrancho hawk, now assured of an orgy of banqueting. There was no contented lowing nor vivacious bellowing; instead, forlorn little groups of wasted skeletons would shuffle soundlessly out of one's path. The very riding horses, weak and overworked, appeared to be infected with the prevailing spirit of deadly fatalism.

Then one would meet the erstwhile Lord of the Forest, the unconquered bull, and how ridiculous it now looked! a caricature, all horns and hoofs, a hairy rug draped over an ambulating frame. A few weeks ago one would not have braved those wicked-looking horns unless assured that they, and the hind feet, were securely held by stout raw-hide, taut to the pull of two straining horses. It looked about eight years old, but so far had successfully defied all efforts to capture it, for its hide did not bear the blemish of a brand. This outlaw was now subdued by Nature and not by Man, its puny hereditary foe. Although tottering from weakness it barred the path, raising and lowering its head with instinctive but futile menace. It made its charge, but the faltering rush only carried it a yard or two before it slumped on to its knees, matter having triumphed over mind.

Altogether nearly 8000 cattle died. In the Creek Section alone, the most remote of all, of 2800 only 100 survived. Over three feet of snow had

fallen in the lower camps, which held the latest arrivals, the last of the wild herds brought over from the softer Tierra del Fuego country. The animals were savage but worn by the journey, and so languished in their strange surroundings.

Man had taken a chance, and his four-footed merchandise had paid for his failure with the torture and agony from which death was a welcome relief. Still, seven or eight thousand remained; if these were unfortunate enough to escape the butcher's knife they might still survive the next bad winter.

There was nothing one could do except skin and keep on skinning at the cost of one peso per hide. Turn the carcass over, come back in a day or two and whip off the half which has thawed from exposure to the sun. Turn it over again and come back later when the other side has thawed. But this job was not so easy as it reads, because it was a very cold one, and had to be done on foot.

And the horses? Numbers died from exhaustion, and the rest by September were in a sorry state, reduced to skin and bone. Work was almost at a standstill, but some jobs had to be done, and, on a larger cattle and sheep ranch, could not all be effected on foot. Anguished appeals to the company's other farms that had not suffered so severely resulted in the concentration at a farm about 200 miles distant of about 100 quadrupeds, the unwanted sweepings of riding horses from half a dozen farms. The Second journeyed down to receive them, and this gave him the opportunity of observing the effects of the bad winter on other establishments.

It is curious how easy it is to be philosophic about other people's misfortunes and how one's own appear so devastating as to dwarf theirs into mere trifles. The Second did not doubt that there had been bad weather in other districts but imagined that his particular sector had been singled out for disaster on the most grandiose scale. Everyone everywhere else must have had a comparatively good time of it and have followed with compassionate interest the tragedy being enacted in his little corner of Last Hope! But he was disillusioned soon after he started off on his long trek to the coast. Too full of their own troubles, few seemed to remember that such a place as Last Hope, or its heroic Second existed. If Last Hope could count its losses by the thousand other districts could count theirs by tens of thousands. It was now late September, and everywhere his track lay through the aftermath of disaster. A month's thaw, but still the camps were inundated, streams swollen into rivers, rivers into seas, and where there were drifts, one rode through deep alleyways cut by the countless hooves of animals? guanacos, horses and sheep? when they fled coastwards from the snowy invasion.

Fences could be descried from a long distance; each had the appearance of a colossal clothesline hung with sheepskins till it was lost over the horizon. The surviving sheep looked as if they would be better off dead. Farmers assessed their losses at anything from fifty to seventy-five per cent of their stock, while one, the most provident of any, had lost nearly all. For many years he had prepared for such a winter cutting and stacking hay all over the camps in each successive year until it seemed

impossible that any scarcity could affect his flocks. But 15,000 sheep eat a lot of hay in three or four months. Dame Winter appeared to resent his unsportsmanlike tactics, which bid fair to rob her of her legitimate prey. The sheep certainly appreciated the hay while it lasted, and once it was gone refused to leave the spot where they had had many a good feed. Also they may have become thirsty; everything was frozen and no one brought them water. The pampered animals that, left to themselves might have rustled through somehow, died in the simple faith that their thoughtful owner would still conjure up fresh comforts. Quite apart from this, the principal farm in Last Hope had lost about 50,000 sheep, and so the Second's experience amounted to a mere skirmish.

On arrival at his destination, the Second aged about five years in the first five minutes' survey of the remounts he had to take charge of. Here were horses long since given up by their tamers as untamable: man-eaters, buckers, kickers, rollers, with a stiffening of old pensioners, foundered, one-eyed and generally "busted" in every detail. Mr Tex Austin would have appreciated this potential circus, but not so the Second, who concentrated all his horsy acumen on the selection of the mounts least calculated to cause his dissolution. Even so, a fortnight later, the return two hundred miles' journey was a swift and hectic one ? brimful of poignant incidents ? and was covered in record time.

The next 'bad' winter was in 1926 on /pampa/, or open, treeless but not necessarily flat country, on a farm carrying 130,000 sheep ? few cattle, thank goodness!

Heavy snow, driven by a fierce south-west wind, began falling one evening in June. During the night the flakes became finer and finer, until there was a shrieking mist hurtling past on its murderous mission ? a real pukkah blizzard with musical accompaniments. Soon evil tidings came over the telephone from every quarter until one wearied of answering the calls. All next day and night the storm continued. To venture out would have been suicidal; to have insisted on others going ? criminal.

On the second morning came a short lull; the houses were all but snowed under by the driven wreaths, fences were covered, the temperature was very far below freezing-point and the weather ominously misty. Everything pointed to the certainty that in these shelterless plains the sheep must have been driven before the storm until brought up by the fences or some natural obstacle. Thousands would be smothered. Men in couples must be sent to each camp, armed with spades to dig the sheep out; wire-cutters or files would have to be taken for cutting the fences so as to give the huddled sheep a free run. Then the /manadas/, groups of mares kept together by one stallion, a few hundred animals, would have to be brought in and driven all over the worst affected camps to make tracks for the stricken sheep; anyhow, the mares' more forceful hoofs would discover some grass for the sheep to feed on.

All must be done quickly, but the first essential was horses, horses and

more horses. But where were they? A small troop was found, but the main troops had been driven before the storm, and the fences, now drifted over, had failed to stop them. To find them in that snowy waste, their tracks having been effaced by the wind-blown snow, would be no easy matter. Then to drive them in would be a still stiffer proposition; a ridden horse would soon tire of struggling through the drifts. To make matters worse fresh flurries of snow fell intermittently throughout the next three days.

Well, do what you can in spite of the storm; two couples go out after the horses and mares, and the rest go where they are most needed. Spare horses, mares and stores will be sent out as soon as possible. Followed a series of arduous, freezing days, all hands assuming the role of St Bernards, saving multitudes of sheep. Every corner and every fence at the north-eastern ends of the camps had raised a pitiable holocaust. Dead, dying and still struggling sheep had piled up in packed layers, forming a bridge over which their more laggardly but equally frantic fellows had passed into the neighbouring camp to continue their frenzied flight until they in turn were brought to a stop by the next fence, which also proved fatal to many. The blindly fleeing sheep had had two and a half days in which to race to their doom or to safety.

Dig, dig, dig ? pull them out. Never mind if your hands are frozen or if you yourself are sick with exhaustion; dig, dig, pull, pull. Then the sheep that are imprisoned, at least those visible above the snow, must be succoured. Make tracks and insinuate the sorry, languid animals so that they string on to some low ridge that has been blasted clear of snow by the hurricane. There they will continue to starve, but they can again be attended to in a day or so. Meantime they will not huddle up and be smothered.

The mares helped matters at the commencement; they were fairly fresh, and could be bunched together so that in the soft, powdery snow they left a useful fairway. But soon they tired, spread out forlornly, and only left the surface pitted with an intricacy of deep holes, each of which served as a trap for the following sheep. Let the mares go ? they will always scrape into some grass, and some of the sheep will get the benefit.

The hoggets, nine-month-old lambs borne down by their nine months' fleece, were in deplorable plight. They were merely little balls of wool, most of them blinded by their own 'wigs' ? head and eye wool. These were as helpless as so many children. Submerged and frozen to the ground in their hundreds, they were unable to move, much less rustle for feed. Balls of ice formed on their fleeces, all over their bodies from nose to tail, and hung like so many stalactites, each weighing several pounds. As the lambs were pulled out, there they would lie ? worn out and immovable. Now the men were given shears with which to disencumber the poor little woollies of their icy incubus. All the work had to be done in the intense chill of the freezing, wintry days; the riding horses having, perforce, to be tethered all night, suffered dreadfully from exposure and semi-starvation. Hard times for all.

For four or five weeks after the snow sheep were to be dug out ? ALIVE.

Riding on the lee of some little gully one would come on a deep drift of hard, ringing snow, and might spot a tiny little vent or breathing hole. Laying an ear to it one might be rewarded by hearing a sort of snuffling beneath. Hullo! here's another bunch. More digging, and a miniature catacomb, in which the animals had subsisted for a whole month, would be discovered. The sheep when taken out would be miserably emaciated but warm. Instead of fleeing before the storm they had sheltered in the first convenient gully, where they were gradually snowed over, but not smothered through being jostled against the fences, as were many of their companions. When hauled out they would assume an everyday expression, nonchalantly putting their heads down to nibble whatever grass was visible. However, many of these died later, as their intestines were choked with the wool chewed off their fellow-prisoners' fleeces.

Many sheep emerged from the ordeal of that bad winter so weak that they succumbed in the early spring from a sudden surfeit of fresh-sprouted grasses. But sheep fight for life, and, after all, things did not go so badly ? only about six per cent killed or missing in the fight against the bitter elements.