

## *On The Skis Of The Explorer*

*By Elsie Locke*

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It was winter in 1918. One Sunday afternoon there was a power failure in Christchurch. A snowstorm had brought down the power lines between the new hydro station at Lake Coleridge and the city. A few small steam generators in the city supplied what power they could. But lighting was erratic and there was not enough power for some industries. Factories had to be shut down. Workers were sent home by the hundreds, and no work meant no pay.

Linesmen went out in the bitter weather to mend the power lines. But snow blocked the road to Lake Coleridge. And the telephone to the power station was out of action. The manager of the power station would not switch the current back on before he got a message from Christchurch to say that nobody was working on the power line.

How could the electricity people in the city give him the "all clear"?

Somebody would have to get through the snow with the message.

Somebody tried, with draught-horses pulling a dray; somebody else, in a car with a snow-plough rigged in front; other people, in a "caterpillar-wheeled motor", on a traction engine, on a Harley Davidson motorcycle with a side-car. Everything got bogged down in the metre-deep soft snow. Nothing could get beyond Hororata, more than forty kilometres from the power station.

The power failure went into its third day. The weather was still bad. It could be days before a thaw set in and the road was cleared.

"You're a Russian, aren't you?" said an engineer to Boris Daniel in the Christchurch electricity branch. "You're from the snowy wastes of Siberia? Why don't you ski out there?"

Everyone laughed - but then they discussed it. A man on skis wouldn't get bogged down. He'd slide over the snow, wouldn't he? But hardly anybody in New Zealand then knew how to ski. Did Boris?

Yes, said Boris, he knew how. And he wasn't afraid of going into strange country.

But where to find the skis?

They rang up one place after another. At last they rang a JJ Kinsey. He had helped to organise the expedition to Antarctica on which the explorer Captain Scott had died six years before.

Yes! Mr Kinsey had skis ... but he wasn't keen to lend them. They had belonged to Captain Scott himself! Boris had to promise to take great care of the skis and not damage them in any way.

There were no ski sticks. Boris made a pair himself, of strong bamboo with cast-iron flanges.

On Wednesday morning he was driven almost to Hororata where the car became stuck in the snow. Here Boris tried out his skill. The ski sticks were stiff, and he had to hold them well away from his sides so that the flanges would not strike the skis. They were awkward to handle, but he felt he could manage. In spite of seven years without practice, he felt inspired by the skis of the great explorer.

He waved goodbye to his driver and set off. After about twenty minutes he came to Gate Hut, one of the telephone huts spaced every few kilometres along the power line. Here workmen told him that the chief engineer had sent orders that he must not travel by night. The people in charge of the electricity board were afraid he would die in the snow, as Captain Scott had. Boris was to stay at Gardiners' farm. On the way he would see the assistant engineer, Mr Hitchcock.

The sun was setting. Boris skied on without seeing any sign of Mr Hitchcock or any farmhouse. He must have been sent in the wrong direction. Upset at losing valuable time, he turned and went back past Gate Hut. Soon he saw a light in the distance, and a car covered with snow. Then through the darkness he heard voices.

"Hey, Bill! There's a strange animal approaching. Looks like it's swimming or gliding. Stay where you are!"

"You'd better come up the pole with me, then!"

"It's a ski-footed jabberwock, that's what it is."

"Quite right," said Boris, as he halted among the laughing men.

They were finishing their work on the line. Mr Hitchcock wanted Boris to go back with them to Hororata, but he said no, it couldn't take much longer to get to the farm. So the engineer gave him a note to take on to the power station next day, and some money for his food and lodging.

He reached the farm without more trouble. There Mr Gardiner explained that they couldn't get to the store and were short of food. However, Boris was welcome to stay in the bunkhouse.

Here a log fire was roaring and Mr Gardiner's son, a cavalryman just returned from the war, was entertaining the farm hands with stories. With some biscuits and a cup of tea

inside him, Boris laid himself down on a pile of horse covers. He fell asleep to the sounds of story telling.

He woke at dawn, very hungry. Soon an old man brought him some breakfast. Then he set out again, following the power line.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky. The air was sharp and quiet. The only sound was his own breathing as he worked his way uphill. Sometimes he slid into holes, but, as the snow grew deeper, the surface became smoother. In many places he could see only the tops of the wire fences, and here and there were sheep lying in deep holes. Mount Hutt rose in shining splendour beyond the Rakaia River, a landmark that did not change. He pushed on and on.

Boris was becoming worried. He had been told that it was thirty-eight kilometres from the farm to the power station. In an hour-and-a-half he seemed to have covered only a quarter of that distance. True, he was climbing, but it was hard going. And now he could see the marks of horses along the way.

Back near Hororata something had been said about two men trying to get through on horseback. Did these prints mean that they would be there before him? That all his effort would be for nothing? It was clear that the horses were having a struggle to get through the deep snow, but perhaps by now they had arrived.

Although he was steaming with exertion and longing for a drink, Boris did not stop when he came to the Brackendale telephone hut. At noon, with hunger and thirst troubling him more, he saw two black spots in the distance. He made out two men on horseback coming towards him very, very slowly.

When they came near, the first man said, "Blow me down! That's a new idea. Making for the power station, are you?"

"Yes," said Boris. "I've got a message for the manager."

"So have we. But we can't do it. We're giving up. The horses can't stand any more. You can take our message too, with pleasure."

The riders had set out a day earlier than Boris. As they left him, they gave Boris a small flask with a little whisky in it.

He set off again in a flood of energy, not only because of the livening drink, but also because he knew that people were counting on the success of his uphill struggle. He could carry on where others had failed.

The country was becoming steeper. The lonely landscape reminded Boris of Manchuria in winter. His shoulders ached from holding his sticks safely away from the skis. At the

top of a small hill he paused for breath. Looking far ahead towards the Rakaia River, he saw three black specks-more men on horseback.

Boris waited. The riders saw him. They started coming towards him, making frantic signals and calling out. When they came near he recognised Mr Blackwood, the manager of the power station.

"Look what's here! Captain Scott of Antarctica!" exclaimed one of the men.

"You're right," smiled Boris. "At least about the skis."

"Have you a message for me?" asked Mr Blackwood.

"Yes – two messages," said Boris, handing them over.

Both messages were the same. They gave the times when the current was to be switched on for testing, and explained how one of the power lines could be used as a telephone line.

"Good! Just what we wanted to know!" said Mr Blackwood. "Wait here, Boris, and I'll go back to the Point Hut. We've got our telephone in order from there to the power station. I'll tell my staff what to do and then we'll all go together back to Hororata."

"Ask them to tell my mother I'm safe, when they get through to Christchurch," said Boris. He felt very happy, very tired and very hungry.

It was much easier on the return journey. The slope was downhill, and he had company with the men riding beside him. The horses were used to the country, but even so, it took them until late afternoon to reach Brackendale station, where they were given a great welcome. About fifteen station hands were gathered around the bunkhouse fire. Boris was given dry socks to wear and a feast of hot mutton stew and sago pudding.

Next day they set out early, with the power lines humming overhead. The electricity was on, after being out for four days.

When they got to Hororata, the whole township came out to welcome them. People crowded into the hotel to hear the story. Then someone asked, "Where are these skis, anyway?"

The skis, the precious skis! Boris rushed outside. To his horror, he saw a man trying them out in a paddock.

"Hey!" cried Boris. "Wait there!" And he leapt the fence.

This was more than his weary legs could take. He landed onto hard-packed snow and fell over. When he tried to get up, his ankle wouldn't obey him. He had strained a tendon and

couldn't walk. So he sat where he was and explained that he had very strict orders not to let anyone else use those skis.

Then Mr Birks, the chief engineer, arrived in a motorcar. With him was a newspaper reporter. In spite of his injured ankle, Boris stood on his skis and was photographed.

After that it was a ride in the car back to Christchurch, to the busy city with the power fully restored, and the safe return of the skis of Captain Scott.