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Tracks

John Sterling Harris

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Tracks

No one saw it, but after
 We read the tracks in the snow,
 We knew what must have happened.

He'd left on a gray and balky horse.
 A day later we followed his tracks
 For ten miles or more
 On barren flat through hoof-deep snow
 That showed a shuffling gait,
 Avoiding occasional sage
 Trotting sometimes, as if spurred,
 Then dragging back to a walk
 And tender on the off hind foot
 Where he'd lost a shoe.

Then he'd jumped—perhaps when spurred.
 Perhaps the rider's hands were deep
 In his sheepskin pockets for warmth,
 Because we found where he fell
 Then got up, favoring a leg—
 The left I remember—
 The rifle must have fallen
 On the next jump.
 We saw where it had landed
 And been picked up.

The man's dragging trail
 Led to the horse's tracks.
 The horse had stopped and turned to watch
 Then trotted off and stopped again.
 The limping gait approached again,
 And again the horse trotted off—
 Two thin lines in the snow
 To the left of his track showed
 He'd held his head to the side
 To keep from stepping on the reins.

It went that way for miles—
The man's steps getting shorter
With marks beside of the rifle butt
Now used as a cane.

Then we found a cartridge case
And another and another
And the mound of a horse

Snug against his belly was the man—
He had tried to save
What diminishing warmth remained,
But even with the saddle blanket
It hadn't been enough
For a winter night.

We talked of the judgment of fools
And wondered how we'd have done.

—John Sterling Harris