

I N C I D E N T A T

Hawk's Hill

A N O V E L

ALLAN W. ECKERT



Chapter 1

Benjamin MacDonald was following a mouse.

The fact that he was doing so was nothing out of the ordinary for Ben; he often followed mice. For that matter, he followed birds, too, when they'd walk rather than fly, and ground squirrels and snowshoe rabbits and anything else if he got half a chance. He sometimes even followed insects. The odd thing about it all was not so much that he was following the mouse as that the mouse was evidently letting itself be followed without taking alarm and disappearing at once.

The little rodent moved along casually, stopping here to sniff, stopping there to pick up and nibble a grain of wheat that had fallen on the barn floor, now and then standing high on its hind legs to look around while nose and ears twitched delicately as it sniffed and listened. Incredibly, the boy was doing the same thing, emulating each movement of the mouse. He crawled on hands and knees a yard behind the mouse as the mouse walked along normally. Where the mouse dipped its muzzle to sniff something on the rough wooden flooring, so too Ben, when he came to that

same spot, would bend until his nose was at floor level and he would sniff there. When the mouse would nibble a wheat grain, Ben would also, resting back on his haunches and daintily holding the single grain in his fingers and nibbling in the same manner. At the frequent pauses in its passage, when the mouse would lift its forepaws from the ground and stand there sniffing and twitching its ears, Ben would do likewise, squatting with his feet flat on the floor, knees bent, hands held limply in front of his chest, nose wrinkling as he sniffed, head cocked to one side as he listened.

At one point the mouse gave voice to a high pitched chirring sound. Immediately, and with incredibly accurate mimicry, the same sound came from Ben, hardly any louder than that which the mouse had uttered. The small rodent cocked its head and stared at him, just as it had looked at him a dozen times before this since the boy had started following it near the barn door. Ben looked back, his own head tilted in the same way.

There was no way of saying how much further this strange little game of follow-the-leader might have gone had there been no interruption. But then, annoyingly, feet clumped heavily near the doorway and the familiar sound of William MacDonald's voice carried through the dimness of the barn's interior.

"Ben? Ben! I saw you come in here, so don't try to pretend you're not there. I want you to come outside."

The boy had turned his head at the sound of his father's voice and now when he looked back, the tiny

mouse was gone. He frowned and then reluctantly got to his feet and walked toward the door. He followed his father outside and squinted against the midmorning brightness until his eyes adjusted. Ben's mother was standing at a point about midway between barn and house, looking toward the east. They walked to her.

"He was in the barn," MacDonald commented as she glanced at them, "on his hands and knees, as usual." He sounded disgusted.

Esther MacDonald shook her head faintly at her husband and then squatted down and held her arms out to Ben, smiling warmly at the boy. He came to her without hesitation and put his arms around her neck when she gave him a brief hug. She kissed his cheek and smiled again, took his small hand in hers and squeezed it. She inclined her head in the direction of the rutted wagon road leading eastward from the farm. A few hundred yards away a rider was approaching with a dog trotting along beside his horse.

"Mr. Burton's coming," she said. "Your father saw him on the way back from Winnipeg last week and he said then that he'd probably come by in the forenoon today. He's our closest neighbor now and your father wanted both of us to meet him. We'd like it, Ben, if you'd start taking an interest in people as well as animals. And I'd like it if you'd shake hands with him like a little man. Will you do that for mother?"

Ben's glance shifted to the rider and then back to her. He shook his head once and then looked at the ground in front of his feet. Esther MacDonald sighed.

A Newbery Honor Book

Ben was not an ordinary six-year-old boy. He was much too small for his age, and he seemed to get along better with animals than with people. None of the people in North Corners knew quite what to make of him. Then one June day in 1870, Ben wandered away from his home on Hawk's Hill and disappeared without a trace into the waving prairie grass. How this shy, lonely boy survived most of a summer in the wilds by forging a bond with a female badger is a poignant story of human courage and change.

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