

THE ARITHMETIC BOOK

by Mary Katherine May

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Chapter One

It was a sunny day during the year of 1858 at the time when early spring brings relief from the long winter, and right before Minnesota claimed its statehood that our story of young and stalwart Sam Sohansson, son of Hans and Minna Sohansson begins.

On this particular day, Sam was on his way to school, currently being held in a makeshift multi-purpose structure on the Bottineau Prairie, thinking all of those important thoughts that young boys think, when suddenly he remembered his serious dilemma: *"What shall I do? What shall I do?"* Sam muttered and cried out, first calling down to the earth as though his ancestors could rise up through the ground to help him out, and then up to the sky—seemingly waiting for a folded note to come sailing down on a gust of wind to land right at the tip of his bare toes.

You see, Sam had lost the book that Mr. Stanley Stoomer, Jr, his teacher for this school session, loaned to him, lent because his family had no money to contribute toward books. The Sohanssons, a large but close-knit family, had recently moved north of Minneapolis and built a simple home with plans to farm after Mr. Sohansson lost his job in the Panic of '57. Poor Sam had been carefully hiding his dilemma from everyone. He maneuvered and changed direction every time the subject came up just so as not to have to tell the truth.

Of course Sam, being as honest as George Washington, would never intentionally tell a lie—which brings us to the reason for all of the maneuvering. Confronted, locked in eye contact with an inquisitor--well the truth would just have to be told.

Then, the night before last after putting on his nightshirt and kneeling to say his prayers, he happened to spy something that looked like a book beneath the bed he shared with his five brothers. Sam caught his breath and held it for a moment, then with a whoosh! All of his pent up air flew out as he bent and swept his arm downward, gathering the book in his hand.

Sam's look of delighted amazement left his face as quickly as it had appeared, for sure enough it was the book loaned to him by Mr. Stanley Stoomer, Jr., but it even more certainly was not in the same shape as when Sam had received it. This was the moment when the first *"What shall I do?"* was heard--if you were a little mouse sitting on Sam's shoulder, because those four pathetic words were barely loud enough to

leave the space surrounding his head.

It seems that *Robinson's Progressive Intellectual Arithmetic Book* would no longer be producing any thoughts nearing intelligence again. Alas, as Sam now recalled, one night he had taken the book to bed with him (since he truly loved to sum up those figures) and then had fallen asleep while perusing through the pages. As the night progressed, one of Sam's five brothers rolled over, causing all of the others to do the same—all sharing the same bed as they did except during the hottest nights of summer. The poor arithmetic book met its shameful demise in the chamber pot under the bed. Being as it was in the space that only boys usually occupied, and being that their mother had her hands full cooking and providing for her six sons and husband, she didn't always pay attention to what happened at the back of their new home in the low space under the roof. Thus, the chamber pot's condition (seldom used) was often neglected. The soaked arithmetic book in the damp of change from cold to warm weather--well, it was now downright stinky and no longer in a rectangular shape.

Sam was now on his way to school with the sorry example of a misplaced textbook, wondering how he would tell his kindhearted teacher the truth while making it seem that circumstances could be worse than they appeared.

Chapter II

Sam, being honest as the day is long on the longest day of summer just could not delay a moment longer. He must go to school, for not to go to school reminded him of his obligation to be helping his mama and papa on the family farm, being how busy they were with all of the brothers.

Thus the "*What shall I do's*" turned into "*I must go to schools*" and for every two steps Sam took he repeated the phrase.

I MUST go to SCHOOL.

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As Sam walked along the trail he came upon a pile of brush just off to the side. Being a boy and all, plus carrying a heavy load of frustration, he lifted his foot off the ground and with the most energy he could muster gave the brush a good, swift kick.

Little did Sam know that a colony of hornets had recently taken up residence inside, hidden and out of sight. Well as sure as warm apple pie being delicious, they did not like being disturbed one bit. Before Sam could say "*I MUST go to SCHOOL*" one more

time, he was surrounded by the angriest hornets west of the Mississippi River.

He hopped. He swung his arms. Sam ran like the wind, flinging *Robinson's Progressive Intellectual Arithmetic Book* who knows where, but couldn't shake those angry hornets. We will never know how many times he was stung. One thing for sure though, is that Sam was smart enough to keep his mouth shut and the hornets out of the inside. As he ran toward the school, Mr. Stoomer was just getting ready to ring the school bell for the children playing outside.

Fortunate for Sam, Mr. Stoomer was taking a moment to see who was playing. Mr. Stoomer's gaze scanned the area, catching a glimpse of the poor stung boy just in the corner of his eye. Quickly, Mr. Stoomer grabbed the blanket rolled and stored on the saddle of his horse. As he ran toward Sam he unrolled it at the same time. Stanley, Jr. was quite an agile fellow and so could run, unroll and call to the children at the same time to get inside, shut the doors and cover the windows.

It didn't take long for screams to replace the happy noises children make, and soon as a dog comes for dinner when called all of Mr. Stoomer's students were inside with the door slammed shut behind them.

Sam was rolled in the blanket, sure enough, and Mr. Stoomer then carried him to his horse and hoisted him up and across the saddle. Fortunate again for Sam, the doc's place was only about 50 paces from the structure being used for a school. Doc Schoenhausen was sitting on the bench outside his medical establishment/home commenting on the affairs of the world with another man who had time for those kinds of things when Sam and Stoomer approached.

Well, Doc, taking one look at Sam said, "Ach! Mein junger Junge!" and rushed him inside. By this time you couldn't find an eye to look into for getting vitals on Sam. Both eyes were not only swollen shut but covered by the rest of the swelling on his face.

As Doc worked on giving Sam medicine and rubbing some kind of smelly grease on him to relieve a bit of the agony from all of the stings, his five brothers thought it ample reason to leave school for the day—out of concern and respect for their brother of course—and were watching from outside through the windows, two in one window and three in the other. Not one of those boys, however, had enough concern to go and get mama or papa to take Sam home. The kindly doctor said a quick "Danke, Gott" for the fact that Sam seemed to have no aversion to hornet stings other than it hurt a lot.

The major part of the swelling had gone down enough by supper time so that Sam could see what he was eating. Though he didn't say it out loud, Sam decided that he would have rather been able to tell Mr. Stoomer about the book and had pain in one place (from sitting on the chair in the corner of the school room all day) than to be stung by all those hornets.

The up side of the whole event was that Mama, out of sympathy for her son, used the last of the dried apples to make a delicious warm apple pie for Sam. His brothers—well, they not only had to do Sam's chores along with their own, but were given a few extra for not going to school and not giving mama and papa the news right away. By the time they were done with their chores the apple pie was not warm any more. As a matter of fact, it was gone.

Chapter 3

Now as previously related, Sam was one of six brothers born to Minna and Hans Sohansson, and he was the second oldest of the bunch. Sam and his older brother, Sander, were born in the old country--Sweden, coming to America as very young boys. Sander loved book learning even more than Sam, and aspired to be a great leader like one of the American presidents he learned about in school.

Sam loved the farm—what it was going to become after a time—and he had no disagreement with hard work or getting his hands dirty. He wanted to be a farmer. Following him were the four younger brothers—Henrik, Ivar, Jakob and Erling.

Henrik already knew that he wanted to be a preacher. Herr Danielis Tunensis, who conducted their church service on the Sundays when he would come north from Minneapolis encouraged him to do just that, even allowing Henrik to be confirmed well before the normal age since he had already memorized and shown understanding of Martin Luther's Small Catechism—which fortunately did not end up in the chamber pot under the bed.

The three youngest boys—Ivar, Jakob and Erling—were pretty much too young to aspire to any type of vocation. What they liked to do was follow Papa around as he did the chores. With the weather warming Papa spent several hours of daylight walking about examining the land he would plant for the first time.

It was really quite a site to see—Papa and the three boys. Hans looked to be the Father of three little boy ducklings, a shadow-row trailing right behind him. They didn't quack of course, but certainly the constant questions did get quite tiresome after a

while. *"Why do trees have leaves, Papa?" "Why do we call the sun the sun, Papa?" "Papa, I'm thirsty." "Where do cows get milk, Papa?"*

Mr. Hans Sohansson was a very patient man indeed, for he listened to his sons from the first step out the door of their humble home at the crack of dawn until the sun was at high noon in the sky, but then he had enough. *"You go now,"* he would say, *"you go help Mama."* Mama did indeed need help because of her again being in the family way, but perhaps the three little boys weren't quite the help she would have desired.

Nevertheless, Mama loved her boys very much and would take time out of her busy day to sit with them and tell a story from her childhood memories. How Ivar, Jakob and Erling enjoyed the stories she told. Somehow they always included little boys who seemed to be just like them!

Today, though, with Spring in the air, Mama was a very tired woman. She called out to Sander and Sam, and when they arrived in answer, Minna asked them to entertain the three little ones for a short time so that she could rest. *"Of course we will!"* they replied. They would take them out scouting for bugs, animals and treasures hidden in the prairie grass.

Not too soon into their trek, however, it became clear to the two older boys that their younger brothers' legs were not as long as theirs which greatly hindered progress, not to forget that Sam was definitely leery of any type of overgrowth. For Ivar, Jakob and Erling it was a good opportunity to explore unknown territory beyond where they usually were allowed, and they were taking full advantage of the freedom to roam.

What Sander and Hans ended up doing was chasing the three boys to keep them near, because something seemed to have happened to their brothers' hearing—they had lost their listening skills and developed run-around-itis all at the same time. The biggest problem was that there were only two of them trying to control three little boys.

Like little puppies with happily wagging tails, Ivar, Jakob and Erling ran hither and yon through the tall grass and brush. Hans caught hold of Ivar's hand while clutching Erling's shirt -- only to lose his grasp with all of the wiggling going on in two directions. Sander swooped Jakob up into his arms as the little boy bent down to pick up a rock, but then Erling, who wiggled loose from Hans's grip, doubled peddled forward right into the back of his legs and away Jakob flew—right out of his arms! Jakob went tumbling down, rolling and giggling at the sport of frustrating both of his older brothers.

However, it wasn't really that long before their energy ran out, making their short legs chug along quite a bit slower. Hans and Sander thought they had finally gotten the situation under control. The boys were now quiet, walking instead of running, and as their ears became "unblocked," hearing was restored. Slowly the small group turned around and started to walk the trail upon which they had come back to their home. "*All is well!*" is the message their smiles and happy eyes conveyed—or so they thought.

"*Where did Erling go?*" Sander inquired. "*He was just in my sight!*" Four eyes scanned their surroundings. Sander looked to the right. *BOOM!* A head popped up right before his eyes—but that wasn't all. Little Erling was holding something in his hands.

"*What do you have, lillebror,*" Sander inquired.

"*Oh, no!*" was Sams's statement.

"*Erling has a book! Erling has a book!*" Ivar and Jakob shouted out excitedly. They raced over to where Sander stood.

"*A book!*" Sander declared. "*What do you call this? A book? This is no book, it is a big smelly thing!*" he stated in a very old country pompous manner. We can only imagine how Sam felt at this point.

There was no prayer to make it go away. So, trying to shrink down and appear as small as he felt, he lifted his gaze to match Sander's, and croaked out, "*Ya. Tis a book, for sure.*" Four pairs of eyes, and two times four is 8. Eight rhymes with late and that's what the book was. It was Mr. Stoomer's copy of *Robinston's Intelligent Arithmetic Book*, twice removed from Hans Sohansson's hands.

What would Sam do now? There was nothing else to do but to tell Mama and Papa what had happened. In his youthful imagination, this was a crisis beyond what could be measured—it was HUGE. In the few moments that had passed, Sander had figured out what the book was and to whom it belonged. "*There will be no pie for you at supper today!*" he said with a nice big grin slicing across his face. "*I will surely enjoy watching YOU do MY chores tonight!*"

Right on cue, as though on stage, the three young brothers in unison claimed, "*I'm hungry,*" as the five turned again started walking the trail toward their home.

Chapter 4

Hans walked quickly, desiring to get back to the homestead before his brothers who would not be able to keep what was revealed a secret—no, not at all. He was thinking hard and thinking fast because all too soon he would need to tell his secret.

Should I tell Mama? Should I tell Papa? Should I tell Mama and Papa? Hmmm.... I will go to Papa, he decided. I will get the worst over first. No... if I tell Mama first then she will feel bad for me and help me tell Papa. Ya! That is better. No... what if Mama gets mad and then tells Papa how terrible a thing this is? Then I will get it worse than ever!

Nearing home, the five brothers could see extra horses and people, who appeared to be a group of men. As they approached Mama broke free from the group, walking toward her sons. “Ah! ‘Tis good you are here. I have news for you. Papa will go with these men to the woods. We will soon have a new home and place for the animals! Won’t it be wonderful? I can open my trunk and put out my things from the old country.” Mama’s looked away. In her mind and heart she had traveled across the ocean, to her homeland, Sweden.

“What are you looking at, Mama?” Jakob asked, for her eyes seemed to see something that they couldn’t—something that gave her a face that looked sad. “Mama, why are you crying?” Jakob now queried.

“It is nothing,” Mama said, “My memories are beautiful and in happiness I cry. Come now, my boys, it is time to wash up for our meal.” Dutifully, the boys lined up before the pan resting on the small stand next to the door of their home. One by one, soap and water applied, rinsed and hands wiped. The water, now dark and foamy with soap, was tossed out into the yard.

Papa joined them at the table after the men left. The hospitality of the pioneer life had led him to invite them for dinner, but none lived to far away, and each had their own chores to attend to. All folded their hands and bowed their heads, as Papa said a prayer of thanks for their food and the men who would help cut logs for their new home.

For the moment, Sam’s book was forgotten as the boys quickly made the food disappear while Mr. Sohansson explained how they would leave the next day when the sun rose in the sky, and how the logs would be transported to their homestead.

“We will build the best house we can with the timber,” he said. “It will be warm and tight to keep out the bugs, mice and snakes. No more, children, will you find little surprises at night falling into your bed from above. We will have a real roof, not one

made from the earth.”

Not all six of their sons were so sure that they minded having the opportunity to come up close and personal with the little critters that joined them. Mama smiled at the thought of not having mice invade her flour, cornmeal and dried beans. “Will we have a floor, Hans?” she asked.

“Ya, for you Minna, I will put a nice, tight floor.” Now the boys smiled, for as they looked from Mama to Papa they could see the love each had for the other, and this was very satisfying indeed.

The moment had come for Sam. “Mama, Papa, may I speak with you alone?” Henrik, not privy to the secret, looked curious. Sander looked smug, and the little ones—well, they just wiggled as usual.

“May we be excused?” Erling inquired.

“Ya, sure.” Papa replied. “You stay close to the door. Do go wandering off.” He cautioned. “Yes, Papa,” the three dutifully replied together.

Sam looked at Mama, he looked at Papa. His eyes traveled to the ceiling and down to the table. He squirmed, he frowned, and he wrinkled his forehead. “Come, out with it,” Papa urged. “We must go on with our lives sometime.”

“Well,” Sam said quietly. Mama and Papa leaned toward Sam, for they could barely hear him. Sam, in his nervousness, reverted to his native language of Swedish. “It’s like this,” he began. “You know the arithmetic book Mr. Stoomer loaned to me? Ah... well... I was summing up figures one night in bed, and it must have slid off sometime after I feel asleep when we were rolling over, and it sort of, uh... landed in the chamber pot under the bed, and ... and here it is.”

Sam placed the sorry sight of the former book on the table, and looked up at his parents with a very pathetic appearance on his face. Mama and Papa didn’t say a word, and the silence was worse than anything for Sam. He started to squirm, and then Mama coughed. She seemed to be choking on something—no, what? Mama was laughing! She laughed so hard the tears flowed from her eyes. Papa quietly smiled. “Ya, that’s a book alright. But not too pretty a book, for sure,” he said. “I think you have been punished already with your worry,” he continued. “You will need to find a job so you can replace the book.”

With relief evident in Sam's voice, he replied, "Ya, Papa. I will find a job for the summer. Words came tumbling out. I will do my work here at home, and will do my work to make money for the book. Thank you, Papa. Thank you, Mama. Tack! Tack!" and with that, Sam jumped up from the bench he was sitting on and ran out the door. He was so happy to be done with the mess that he ran around in circles with the energy of a forgiven son.

For a brief moment the anxiety returned, since he still had to confess the problem to Mr. Stoomer. However, telling his teacher what happened was not near as frightening anymore now that Mama and Papa had given him a solution to the problem. *How happy I am!* Sam thought. *How happy I am!*

Remember... God always leaves the light on for YOU!