**Arbuckle Stories **

**Chapter 2o**

**From Belle Vue Farm**

**“The Top of the Ladder”**

**By Jim Arbuckle**

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*The following is both a factual and fictional happening when I was 18 years old. I hope you enjoy “***The Top of the Ladder.”**

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November usually brings chill to the fall air, but the heat could be felt at Belle Vue farm as Alex Arbuckle was not in a very good mood. His son Lockhart and wife Jean were in Florida visiting Alex’s nieces, Price McLaughlin and Lynn Unger. They also were visiting their Uncle Lock and Aunt Gladys Arbuckle in St. Petersburg. Although in his late seventies, Alex could still do his share of the work, but Alex was now at a point in his life where he did not want to climb the tall ladder that led to the high hay loft in the barn. Alex had asked his grandson Jim to climb the high mal and get the hay down each evening, so that he could do the feeding in the mornings by himself. But for the last two days, Jim had failed to get the hay down as his granddad ordered, and Alex was mad enough to warm the chilly autumn air.

Jim arrived every evening to help Alex with the feeding and other chores. And one evening he spent the night. He enjoyed helping his granddad! He always loved talking to his grandmother and eating her delicious meals! And when he spent the night, he enjoyed an upstairs bedroom that was once the room of his Aunt Virginia Arbuckle Lewis.

“Hey Nana,” Jim said as he walked in the kitchen one afternoon after school. “Has Dat already gone to the barn?”

“Yes,” Carrie said as she placed a pitcher in the cabinet. “Jimmy, don’t eat all those cookies! You will ruin your appetite for supper. You go on to the barn! Alex will be looking for you.”

As Jim walked up to the barn, he was laughing and playing with the dog, Kate. But as he neared the barn, an ill feeling suddenly came over him. But as he walked in the barn, he felt better as he saw a huge pile of hay in the trailer. “Hey Dat,” Jim said. “Have you already got the hay down for in the morning?”

“Yea,” Alex said as he stabbed a pitch fork in the pile of hay. “But this is the last time I am going to do it! I’ve asked you for the last two days to get that hay down, and tomorrow I expect you to do it.”

Jim spent the night with his grandparents. The three ate dinner in the kitchen as they listened to the evening news and weather over the radio. As Carrie was preparing to do the dishes, Lockhart called from Florida to see how his parents were. Alex was happy to speak to his nieces Price McLaughlin and Lynn Unger. Lockhart then talked to Alex about selling their calves, before closing the conversation with Carrie.

Jim had gone to bed, but awoke and decided to go to the barn to get the hay down from the high mal. Climbing up the ladder, he saw how narrow it was as it reached the top of the barn. Jim was near the top of the high ladder when he suddenly lost his balance and fell backwards. His death defying scream could be heard as his helpless body fell to a sure death to the hard ground below.

His scream of fright could also be heard as he jumped up in bed.

“Jimmy!” his grandmother yelled, calling to him from her bedroom below. “Jimmy, what is it?”

In a minute, Carrie had climbed the stairway. “My goodness,” Carrie said as she entered the bedroom. “Mercy me, you must have had a night mare! Your body is covered with sweat.”

“I guess I did have a bad dream,” Jim said as he looked confused.

“What’s going on up there?” Alex shouted from the room below. “Carrie, where are you?”

“I’m up here in Virginia’s room,” Carrie called down. “Jimmy has had a terrible night mare.”

“What did he see a ghost?” Alex yelled up through the floor vent. “Let’s go to bed!”

“For pity sake,” Carrie said as she sat down on the bed. “Jimmy, what were you dreaming?”

“It was nothing, Nana,” Jim said to his grandmother. “I can’t even remember. I’m okay.”

As Carrie cut off the light and walked back down the stairs, Jim still felt shaken, but eventually fell back to sleep.

The morning was frosty as a rooster crowed on the backyard fence beside the smokehouse. The sun however soon warmed the cool air as it shown through the gold fall foliage. Beautiful would be the word to the beholder, but grumpy was the word for Alex as he came from the barn to the house to eat breakfast.

“Alex, what is it?” Carrie asked as her husband warmed his hands by the stove.

“It’s the wonder I’m here,” Alex said as Carrie put eggs and sausage on his plate. “I had to climb the high mal and get the hay down again. I’ve asked that darn Jimmy all week to get that hay down, but I guess he thinks he is too good or doesn’t care if I fall and kill myself. All he does when he comes here, is piddle.”

“Oh Alex,” Carrie said standing by the table. “I don’t know why Jimmy has not gotten the hay down, but I don’t feel that it is because he thinks he is too good or does not care.”

“Then what is it?” Alex snapped. “All he does is ride his horse and do what he wants.”

“Alex,” Carrie said as she poured him a glass of cold milk. “Have you asked Jimmy why he has not climbed and thrown the hay down?”

“No!” Alex said frowning at his wife. “I have not asked the little baby why he hasn’t got the hay down! I’m not asking him anything! When I tell him to do something, I mean for him to do it!”

“He sure had a bad dream last night,” Carrie said. “He sure looked pitiful when I walked in.”

“Hooey,” Alex said as he tossed his napkin on the plate. “It will be a bad dream and pitiful if I fall from the top of the barn and kill myself! Who will do any work around here if that happens? Lockhart is in Florida and that darn Jimmy coming and doing as he pleases. I’m going to town!”

But before Alex left for town, his day of being upset was not over. Carrie had never driven a car and Alex’s sister, Emily had decided to stop driving, so she had offered Carrie her 1950 Dodge car to drive. As Alex came out the back door he saw his son, Thomas Alex and daughter, Virginia coming through the yard. “What are you two doing here?” Alex said with a laugh.

“We have come to talk to you, Daddy,” Virginia said.

“Well talk fast,” Alex said. “I’m on my way to town.”

“Daddy,” Thomas Alex began. “Aunt Emily is going to stop driving and she wants to give her car to Mother.”

“What does she want to give it to Carrie for?” Alex asked with a frown.

“For her to drive,” Virginia said. “Mother wants to get her driver’s license so she can drive.”

“What?” Alex yelled. “What in the world does Carrie want to learn to drive for?”

“Why do you think?” Thomas Alex said with a laugh. “Both Virginia, Lockhart and I think Mother should learn how to drive.”

Well, I don’t!!” Alex yelled. “She doesn’t need to drive! Lockhart and I will drive her any place she wants to go. I’m going to town!”

Alex spent most of the morning in town going to the bank, and picking up salt.

No sooner had Alex returned than Jim rode in and tied his black and white horse to the backyard fence. “Are you going to get that hay down?” Alex asked as he slammed the truck door shut.

“Dat,” Jim said walking toward the truck. “Why can’t we just get the hay down from the two lower mals first?”

“If you tear a house down,” Alex said looking at his grandson. “Which go you take off first, the roof or the floor? A fool knows that the top has to be removed before the bottom. Now are you going to get the hay down from the high mal, or are you going to tell me how to run this farm?”

As Alex began to pull the sacks of salt off the truck, Jim headed on up to the barn.

“Kate,” Jim said as he petted the happy Border collie dog. “I need to go up and throw some hay down. Kate, all I have to do is climb up and throw it down. That won’t be hard, will it girl? Up the ladder I go. “

As Jim stood and looked up, the ladder seemed higher than ever. “What’s wrong with me?” Jim said to himself. “Just because I had a silly dream that I fell off this thing doesn’t mean anything. I climbed this ladder all the time when I was little. Johnson, little Alex Davis and I climbed it all the time. What is wrong with me? Why am I afraid to climb this silly ladder?”

“Are you going to climb up and get the hay down?” Alex said walking in the barn. “Or are you going to stand and look at the ladder all day? Who in the world were you talking to?”

“I was talking to Kate,” Jim said as he walked out of the barn. “I have to go Dat! I forgot, but I have to do something.”

“What is wrong with that crazy boy?” Alex yelled as Kate began to bark. “He won’t do a darn thing I tell him!”

Carrie was just as surprised and confused as her husband when Alex told her at supper what had happened. She was concerned about her husband climbing the tall ladder at his age, but assured Alex that Jimmy was not disrespectful or lazy. She however could not put her finger on why Jim would not climb and get the hay down.

The next day, Jim was off from school and he was at the barn playing with Kate when he saw a Greenbrier Tractor Sales pickup pull up to the garage, and his dad, and a short humped back man with black hair getting out.

“Hi Daddy!” Jim said as he walked down to the pickup.

“Where is Daddy?” Thomas Alex asked his son.

“He went to town,” Jim said. “And Nana went to town with Aunt Virginia.”

“Jimmy, this is Cliff Hammer, our new Allis Chalmers block man,” Thomas Alex said as the two shook hands. “I brought him over to meet Daddy and Mother, and to also see the house.”

“The house looks remarkable and beautiful when we passed by,” Cliff said. “Thomas Alex, are you going to show me this historical house that you grew up in?”

Before they all walked down to the house, Thomas Alex told Cliff all about the old wooden barn, built before 1822, and how he had helped work the farm until he left for college.

Once in the yard, they walked around to the front. “Would you look at this?” Cliff said looking up at the big red brick house. “Look at those columns and all the carvings on the wood below the roof. You see many homes like this in Virginia where I live, but not many like this in Pennsylvania where I grew up. It must have been something growing up in a house like this.”

“Yes it was,” Thomas Alex said as Cliff walked on to the front porch and admired the carvings around the door. “Mother does a great job in taking care of it and keeping it spotless. Jimmy, tell Cliff more about what you know.”

“It was built in 1822 by John Dunn, a man who built many big southern style homes,” Jim said as Cliff examined the big round columns. “The brick of the house was burnt in the front yard by enslaved labor. And the wood work of the house was all hand carved by a man named Conrad Burgess. The stairwell in the hall is really nice and all hand carved.”

As they returned to the back yard, Cliff admired the two tall brick chimneys that served the fireplaces. Thomas Alex pointed to the upstairs room where he and my mother lived when they were married, and also where Lockhart and his wife Jean live now. Hearing Kate barking, they looked and saw Thomas Alex’s mother and sister returning from town.

“Cliff, this is my mother Carrie, and my sister Virginia,” Thomas Alex said as they all met at the back yard gate.

“I am so pleased to meet you both,” Cliff said, shaking each lady by the hand. “I was just admiring your lovely home. I am dying to see inside, but I am expecting an important phone call in a few minutes, so I need to get back over to the tractor business.”

“Well perhaps you will take dinner with us tonight,” Carrie said. “We would love to have you, and the men can show you the highlights of the inside. That way you can meet Thomas Alex’s father, Alex. My son Lockhart and his wife are in Florida.”

“You know that may be a great idea,” Cliff said smiling at Thomas Alex. “I met your husband the last time I came. He called me the Yankee, and I called him Dixie. But I am sorry, Mrs. Arbuckle, I have an engagement tonight, but I would love to come tomorrow night if that would be okay.”

“Yes, Tuesday evening would be fine?” Carrie said.

“Grand,” Cliff said as he shook her hand. “I am looking forward to it, and always enjoy your husband.”

“Then we’d better get back and get some work done,” Thomas Alex said, as Cliff thanked Carrie and shook hands with Virginia again. “Mother, we’ll see you.”

When Alex returned a few hours later, he called for Carrie, but not finding her, he called Virginia and asked if his grandson, Johnson would come down and help him with the feeding. Lockhart was not scheduled to be back for another week, so Alex was happy when he heard that Johnson would be down. As Alex went to the barn, he saw that Jim had once again not thrown any hay down from the high mal. As he mixed feed for the milk cows, he was glad to see his grandson Johnson walking toward the barn. “Boy, you sure got here fast,” Alex laughed rubbing his grandson on the head.

“Dat,” Johnson said as his granddad began climbing the ladder. “You should not be climbing that ladder at your age. Be careful and watch your step, Dat!”

After a pile of hay hit the floor from far above, Johnson stood and watched with concern as Alex slowly made his way down the tall ladder. “Well, there’s the hay!” Alex said as he reached the bottom. “No thanks to Jimmy.”

“Dat,” Johnson said as Alex brushed the hay off his clothes. “I wonder why Jimmy won’t get the hay down from the mal?”

“I don’t know!” Alex said. “I have no idea what is wrong with him. Johnson, you take Kate and go get the cows, so I can begin the milking.”

When Alex and Johnson reached the house for dinner, Carrie informed him that Thomas Alex had brought Cliff Hammer over, and he would take dinner with them tomorrow night. After dinner Alex and Johnson watched TV. Soon after that, Alex went to bed.

The next morning Alex drove the tractor as Johnson tossed hay to the cattle and sheep from the trailer. Alex was happy when he returned to the barn and saw a huge pile of hay on the floor below and beside the high ladder. But he was not too happy when he returned to the house to report his finding.

“Alex,” Carrie said with a funny look on her face. “I’m afraid Jimmy did not get the hay down. It was a friend from school.”

“What?” Alex said as he sat down to lunch. “What do you mean a friend from school?”

“For pity sake,” Carrie said as she sat vegetables on the table. “I don’t know what is going on, Alex, but for some reason Jimmy had his friend get the hay down. I suppose it is okay.”

“No, it’s not okay!” Alex yelled as he placed green beans on his plate. “When I tell Jimmy to do something, I mean for him to do it. I don’t mean for one of his school friends to do it. I don’t know what I am going to do with that boy, but when I’m finished eating – I’m going to take a nap.”

When Alex returned from his nap, Carrie reminded him that Cliff Hammer had phoned and was excited about coming to dinner. He was glad that she had invited Mr. Hammer to supper. Alex however, was not glad when Carrie informed him that Jim’s friend had once again thrown the hay down from the high mal. “I feel like jerking a knot in that boy’s tail,” Alex said as he prepared to go to the barn.

“Alex, I wish you would not talk that way,” Carrie said. “I’m sure Jimmy has his reasons for having his friend get the hay down. Lockhart will be back next week and all will be well.”

The next evening, Thomas Alex and Louise brought Cliff Hammer to supper as planned. Carrie had worked all day preparing the evening meal, and the dining room table looked lovely, as Louise helped bring the food in.

“Welcome, and come on in!” Alex yelled as he and Cliff shook hands.

“I thought you were a farmer!” Cliff said slapping Alex on the arm. “What are you doing wearing a white shirt and bow tie?”

“Oh I thought I’d dress up a little,” Alex laughed. “Since I heard that a big shot from Allis-Chalmers was coming to dinner. Come on in the hall and have a seat.”

As Alex flopped down in his old Morse chair, Thomas Alex showed Cliff the house. Cliff especially enjoyed the hand carved doors, and the large stairwell that winded all the way to the attic.

A half hour later everyone sat down around the big dining room table, as Thomas Alex had grace. “We thank you dear Lord for this food and the hands that prepared it,” Thomas Alex said as all bowed their head. “Bless this food for the nourishment of our bodies. For Christ’s sake, Amen.”

As everyone enjoyed Carrie’s roast beef dinner, Alex explained to Cliff Hammer how the kitchen was once separate from the house, and that the servants would carry the food to the table, walking a few feet outside. Hammer was amazed when Carrie told him that all the wallpaper in the house was the original from when the house was built in 1822.

Then all listened as Cliff told everyone that he was born and raised in Pennsylvania, but had moved to Roanoke, VA after taking a job with Allis-Chalmers.

After Cliff had eaten a piece of Carrie’s lemon pie, Alex and Thomas Alex took him to the parlor, where Alex poured him a glass of apple cider. “Will this make me drunk?” Cliff laughed as he took a sip from the cobble glass.

“It’ll probably make you tipsy,” Alex laughed. “My boy Lockhart and I make cider every year, and our old cider press may be as old as this house. We used to turn it with a horse, but now use a gasoline engine.”

“Cliff, this is my great grandmother, and Daddy’s grandmother,” Thomas Alex said as he pointed to a large portrait on the wall. “She of course was the first Arbuckle lady in the house.”

“What is that little book in her hand?” Cliff asked. “And was this her piano?”

“That’s a little Bible” Alex said. “Mama said it was the Gospel According to John. And this big old piano was hers. I don’t think it’s been played since she died in the 1870’s. I know Carrie or any of our family ever tried to play it.”

Hammer loved how Conrad Burgess had hand carved much of the wood work in the house. Hammer called Burgess an architectural genius as he examined his extraordinary carvings on the mantels and doors. He was especially impressed and interested of the doors which had box latches. “Your grandfather may not have built this house,” Hammer remarked to Alex. “But he was a wise man to buy it, and I’m sure a very rich man too.”

“I don’t know how rich he was,” Alex laughed, but I imagine he was a wise man. He died five years before I was born. I know he was a hard worker. I’m a hard worker, and so is my son, Lockhart.”

“You know what?” Hammer said to Alex as he observed the stairwell and portraits around the house. “I think this house should have been built above the barn. It is higher there and the overlook of the farm would be magnificent.”

“Well, that’s a little too late for that now,” Alex said as all laughed.

The three men talked for another hour in the parlor, before Cliff Hammer thanked Carrie, and bid all good-bye.

Alex sat down in his chair for awhile, and then went to bed, well past his bed time.

Alex was up early the following morning and glad that Cliff Hammer had come last night, but not so glad when his eldest grandson was still having a friend throwing the hay down from the high loft. He was also upset that Jim had been avoiding him.

And no sooner had Alex left in the truck than Jim rode in on Cochise and put him in the barn.

“Hi Nana,” he said as he saw his grandmother in the back yard. “Where’s Dat?”

“He gone over to check a sheep at Emily’s barn,” Carrie said. “Do you need to talk to him? Alex sure has been fussy.”

“Dat fusses at everything,” Jim said as he walked into the kitchen. “Dat fusses and has to have his way all the time.”

“Jimmy,” Carrie said as she sat down at the kitchen table. “Why won’t you get the hay down as Alex wants? It’s not like you to disobey. Can you not tell me?”

“I’m afraid to climb the ladder,” Jim said in a low and embarrassing voice. “I’m afraid, Nana! I don’t know what is wrong with me. Davis, Johnson, little Alex and I used to climb it all the time when we were little, but now I am afraid.”

“There is nothing wrong in being afraid,” Carrie said. “All of us are afraid of certain things. When I was young, I was afraid of spiders.”

“Dat is not afraid of anything,” Jim said. “He is brave and climbs the ladder and I am scared.”

“Oh, Alex is afraid of things,” Carrie said with a laugh. “Getting old is really beginning to frighten him, and not being able to do what he used to do really frightens him too. Jimmy, you need to tell Alex that you are afraid to climb the high ladder.”

“Yeah, and have him laugh at me,” Jim said. “Tell him that and he will laugh.”

“Well let him laugh,” Carrie said. “It doesn’t take a man to climb a ladder, but it does take a man to admit and give a reason for not doing something. Just tell Alex and don’t pay any attention if he laughs. He laughs at me all the time when I tell him things, but I just don’t pay any attention to him. Just remember, it doesn’t take a man to climb a ladder, but it does take a man to stand up and explain his reasons.”

“Okay Nana,” Jim said giving his grandmother a smile. “Thanks!”

Jim rode his horse over to Aunt Emily’s barn, but not seeing his granddad anywhere, he rode on home.

The next day as Alex came to the house for lunch, he saw Carrie hanging clothes on the line. “Alex, I need to talk to you,” Carrie said when she spotted Alex passing through the yard.

“Well talk to me why I’m eating lunch,” Alex said as he went in the house.

“Alex,” Carrie said as he was washing his hands. “I just spoke to Jimmy and he told me the reason he has not thrown the hay down. Jimmy is afraid to climb the tall ladder. Alex, did you hear me?”

“Yes!” Alex said as he sat down to lunch. “Why did he tell you? Why does he tell you everything and not me?”

“Jimmy did not tell you Alex for fear you would laugh at him,” Carrie said.

“Well,” Alex laughed. “He’s afraid to climb the tall ladder and he is also afraid to stand up to me! He is always running and telling you everything. He acts more like a little girl than he does a man”

“Why do you have to be this way, Alex?” Carrie asked. “Why do you have to mock everyone?”

“I’m not mocking anyone,” Alex said as he finished his lunch. “I’m going over to the scales and see if any of the cattle trucks have arrived yet. I’ll see you at dinner, and tell Jimmy to get the eggs if he is not afraid of the chickens. I’ll see you later unless I fall from the mal and break my neck.”

As Alex walked out in the back yard, he saw Cochise tied at the barn. Walking up to the barn, he saw a huge pile of hay on the trailer between the two indoor silos. And standing at the top of the barn loft was Jim. “Well!” Alex said smiling up at his grandson. “It looks like you made it to the top of the ladder.”

“Yeah,” Jim said in a low voice. “But I’m afraid to climb down, Dat. What is wrong with me?”

“There is nothing wrong with you, squirt,” Alex said with a laugh. “Just hold the top of the ladder, swing your right foot over on the step, and climb down. Just don’t look down! If an old man like me can do it, then I know that you can do it. Just hold the top of the ladder, step on, and don’t look down.”

“I can’t, Dat!” Jim said with fear in his voice. “I’m afraid! I’m afraid I will fall!”

“You’re not going to fall,” Alex said. “Just do as I say.”

Alex stood and watched as his eldest grandson slowly gripped the top of the ladder and swung his leg over placing it in the next to last step. Slowly, but shaky, Jim climbed down the tall ladder.

“Do you think you can climb up and down the ladder again?” Alex laughed looking at Jim standing on the ground.

“I don’t know, Dat!” Jim said looking down at the floor. “I still don’t know!”

“Squirt,” Alex said. “Do you want me to climb and get the hay down until Lockhart comes back?”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind,” Jim said looking at his granddad. “I would really like that!”

“Jimmy!” Alex frowned. “From now on I want you to talk to me. If you had told me you were afraid to climb that darn ladder, we would have not had all this fussing and fighting. I thought you were just trying to disobey me. Next time talk to me like a man. Don’t hide behind a woman’s skirt.”

“Alright,” Jim said. “I was just afraid that you would laugh at me.”

“Well, I’m not laughing,” Alex said with a smile. “Even if people laugh at you – stand your own ground – look them in the eye and tell them how you feel.”

“Alright,” Jim said smiling. “Then are you going to allow Nana to get her driver’s license? She wants to drive and there is nothing wrong with that. Aunt Emily is giving her car to her.”

“I’ll think about it!” Alex laughed. “I think Carrie is too old to drive, but Thomas Alex, Virginia and Lockhart are fussing at me so much that I guess I won’t have much choice.”

“Since you will be getting the hay down,” Jim said. “Do you want me to help milk until Lockhart gets back?”

“That will be fine!” Alex said. “You’re not much good at milking, but you can try. Come down to the house, I want to show you something.”

As the two walked from the barn to the back yard, Kate came running and barking to greet them.

“That fellow Hammer,” Alex said pointing to the north. “He thought the house should have been built up above the barn so you could see more of the farm. I think I like it just where it is! Come on! Get Kate and let’s go back to the barn.”

*Written by Jim Arbuckle in 1992*

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*It has been many years since this happened, but the old ladder is still stands in old Belle Vue barn between the two indoor silos. The square bales that are now used are in a lower mal across from the high mal. Most of the hay now at Belle Vue is large round bales.*

*Cliff Hammer has long since retired from Allis-Chalmers, and the last I heard, he and his wife Doris were living at a retirement home near Roanoke, VA.*

*Alex did some grumbling, but he did allow Carrie to get her driver’s license. She never drove ten miles from home in Emily’s old 1950 Dodge, but she did drive it up until her death. She willed and left the car to her grandson, Johnson Lewis. Come with me next time as I tell you about a famous ghost of Greenbrier County.*

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FAMILY Members IN THE STORY

Grandfather *Alex Arbuckle (Dat) – 1887-1990*

*Grandmother Carrie Botts Arbuckle (Nana) – 1894-1975*

*Daughter Virginia Arbuckle Lewis – 1924-1984*

*Grandson Jim Arbuckle – 1951-*

*Grandson Cary Johnson Lewis Jr. – 1954-*

*Son Thomas Alex Arbuckle – 1921-2013*

**To see a picture of the high ladder in the barn, go to PHOTOS and**

**Click on Chapter 20 “The Top of the Ladder.”**