



ENDURING *Hope*

KARA LYNN RUSSELL

Enduring
Hope

An Orchard Hill Romance

by

Kara Lynn Russell

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Enduring Hope: An Orchard Hill Romance

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For The Creekside Coffee Klatch.
Thanks for all your encouragement.

Prologue

Summer had begun to make its appearance in Orchard Hill. Pansy Parker sighed with contentment as the porch swing rocked gently and the scent of lilacs washed over her. The lilacs were almost done blooming. She couldn't believe it was June already.

The year was almost half over and she and her rival Misty Green were tied at two matches each in their contest to prove who was the best matchmaker. Misty had manipulated events to bring together Angel Marcel and Jeff Bradley, and just lately, Faith Fielding and Andrew Thomas. "While I," Pansy said to herself, "facilitated the romance of Grace Randall and Riley O'Neil as well as that of Lily Robinson and Ian O'Neil."

The man sitting next to her on the swing reached over and took her hand. Pansy smiled at him. Who would have thought the two of them would have found romance at their ages, which were... *Well, let's just say beyond the normal retirement age*, Pansy told herself.

Arthur *was* retired in fact, and lived in Florida. Pansy still worked as a secretary for the Orchard Hill Community Church. She loved her job and couldn't see any reason to retire.

Unless Misty won their little matchmaking contest. Pansy could never stand it if that woman managed to weasel out a victory there. Misty was the choir director and chair of the worship committee so she was always at the church, it seemed. If Misty won, Pansy thought she'd have to retire just to get away from the woman's bragging. She couldn't believe that annoying woman was Arthur's daughter. They were nothing alike. *Maybe Misty was adopted*, thought Pansy.

But she had to get busy and put together another

match. She leaned her head on Arthur's shoulder. He had definitely been a distraction to her, but she didn't mind. No one had made her feel this special since her husband had passed away so many years ago.

As she and Arthur sat together, and the sun began to set, she pondered the Orchard Hill singles. Who needed her talents? She heard a door slam and saw her neighbor Oliver Laurence coming down his porch steps. When he saw them, he raised a hand in greeting before getting into his car and driving away.

Arthur and Pansy returned the wave, and Arthur remarked to her, "I'm glad you have such good neighbors Pansy. I'd worry about you living alone otherwise."

"I don't live alone," she reminded him "I have my son here."

"That's right," agreed Arthur "but that's only temporary, and he's never home anyway. We've been dating for weeks now, and I've never met him."

Dating. Pansy wanted to laugh at that. It sounded like they were teenagers. But sometimes, with Arthur, she felt like a teenager again. "He's been working a lot lately. I know he's anxious to get established here." And get out of my house, she added silently. She loved Perry as only a mother could, but she couldn't believe she'd raised such a slob! Lately she'd begun to sympathize with his ex-wife, even if the woman had run off with another man and divorced Perry.

But she was getting distracted again. She had to find two people who needed each other. Wait a minute. Oliver. He was single and new in town. Who could she match him up with?

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you," said Arthur, breaking her concentration.

"Oh, what's that?"

"Are you avoiding me at church?"

Uh-oh. "Well, not exactly."

"That sounds like a 'yes' to me."

Pansy pulled back from him a little so she could see his face. "I haven't wanted to tell you this, but...but your daughter and I don't exactly get along."

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“That’s silly. Misty has her faults, of course, but she’s a lovely woman. I’m very proud of her.”

“She does a very good job of directing the church choir,” Pansy offered. That was true, even if Misty sometimes picked that awful contemporary worship music rather than the traditional hymns Pansy loved.

“I’m sure you two could get along. Maybe we should all have dinner together some time.”

“That would be...um...nice, dear.” Pansy leaned back and laid her head on Arthur’s shoulder again. “Let’s not talk anymore. Let’s just enjoy this beautiful evening. The stars will be out soon.”

He squeezed her hand gently and fell silent again. Pansy began thinking about a potential girlfriend for Oliver. She had to get going if she wanted to stay ahead of Misty Green.

“Your back door is all fixed,” said Perry, coming from the back room to the front of Misty Green’s health food store, The Green Scene. “It won’t stick any more, and the squeak is gone.”

“Thank you Perry. What can I do to pay you back?”

He set his tool box on the counter. “I know a good place to start.”

Misty couldn’t hold back her own grin. “And where would that be?”

Leaning down, Perry kissed her. “How about right there.”

She giggled. No woman her age should giggle, but she couldn’t help it. Perry made her so happy. “I was thinking I could take you out to dinner or something.”

It warmed her heart when he answered, “Let’s cook something together at your house.” There weren’t a lot of men in Orchard Hill who appreciated her style of cooking. The idea of eating Tofu, alone, had them running the other way.

“Then later,” Perry added, “I could take you to the movies.”

“No, let’s at least go Dutch. You can’t afford it.”

He leaned down again and kissed her nose. “Yes, I can. I’ve been getting a lot of work lately, and I’m up

for a steady job with a construction company.”

Misty’s eyes widened, and she bounced a little where she stood. “That’s wonderful! I hope you get it.”

“Me, too. So what do you say to a movie?”

“All right.”

“And then...”

“And then what?”

“How about you sit with me and my mother in church tomorrow?”

Misty’s enthusiasm deflated. Luckily she could avoid that one. “The choir is singing. I’ll be with them.”

“OK. I’ll meet you in the gathering space for coffee afterward.”

Misty faked a smile. There was no way she was getting near Perry if his mother was around. Pansy would probably have a heart attack if she knew they were dating. “That sounds great. I’ll find you after church, OK.” And as soon as I find you, I’m going to avoid you, she added to herself.

Chapter One

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

~Romans 12:12 NRSV

Oliver's gaze followed Hope as she crossed the room. She was everywhere. Everywhere he went, she seemed to show up. How could he have forgotten that Orchard Hill was the name of her hometown? How could he have known she would move back, or that she would be working at the same school where he'd signed on as a physical education teacher, or that she would be a member of the church his neighbor had invited him to attend?

Her bubbly personality, her frequent laugh, her constant chatter, all grated on his nerves. And that smile. Definitely too toothy for his taste. Then there was...there was...Oh, who was he kidding?

Right now, he was inclined to believe in the reality of fate and the likelihood that it found tormenting him to be good fun. Hope Velasquez was the only woman who had ever come close to winning his heart, and that was a prize he wasn't planning on giving away—ever.

So, naturally, he had to pretend to dislike her. It allowed him to keep his distance. Getting close to Hope was dangerous for him—and for her, because he knew he'd end up breaking her heart. He didn't want to do that, even if it meant this constant torture of seeing her everywhere and not approaching her, not talking to her, not knowing how she was really doing, and not ever, ever touching her.

But he was doing the right thing, and that had to count for something, didn't it? He watched as someone said something to her that made her laugh. Her face lit up, her big brown eyes sparkled, and he felt a

sharp pain in the region of his heart. Apparently it didn't.

"There you are, Oliver."

He turned at the sound of his neighbor's voice. "Thank you for inviting me today Mrs. Parker. I enjoyed the service." That was true. He didn't want to admit to how long it had been since he'd stepped into a church, but he was glad to be back. Thinking of joining a church made him feel settled, as if he belonged somewhere.

"I hope I'm not jumping the gun, but I was wondering..."

"Yes, Mrs. Parker?"

"I was wondering if you might be interested in playing on the church softball team."

"How often do they play?"

"Just once. The team enters in the Fourth of July tournament sponsored by the elementary school. The money raised is used..."

"For the summer rec' program. I heard about that. Thank you Mrs. Parker, I think I would like to join. It's a worthy cause." He had been thinking about finding a way to become involved in that because it funded the tee ball program he headed. Oliver would have volunteered to be on the planning committee, but it was full by the time he'd found out about it.

Pansy Parker led him to a table at the side of the narthex. It held several clipboards with pencils attached by strings. She handed one of them to him. "Here's the softball team sign up."

He accepted the clipboard and checked the names carefully. There wasn't a single Velasquez among them. He was safe. Oliver signed his name just as he heard a voice calling, "Aunt Hope, will you sign up for the softball team with me, please?"

It was a different Hope. It had to be. But when Oliver turned around, it was her standing there with a teenage girl at her side, waiting for their turn with the clipboard.

He stifled the urge to erase his own name and handed it to her. In spite of his efforts to avoid her, Oliver realized he would have to endure spending

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some time with Hope this summer. Fate again?

"Thank you Oliver," she said, her voice as soft and sweet as always.

"Sure," he mumbled without meeting her eyes. Then, he walked away.

Hope felt her smile falter, but only for a moment. Then, she signed her name and gave the clipboard to Abby. She didn't know why she let Oliver bother her, but he did. She went out of her way to be friendly to everyone. She didn't understand what Oliver had against her. They had been friends for a while in college, but one day, he had started to avoid her—and he hadn't shown any signs of warming to her since he'd moved to Orchard Hill.

Hope shook her head. There was something wrong with her, that she should care so much about his opinion. But she really liked Oliver. She found him an admirable teacher with a true affection for his students—for all his students, not just the athletically gifted ones. He was great with the special ed' class—filled with a seemingly endless patience for those students. He was encouraging to the book worms and the klutzes. He challenged the sports crazed kids. Plus, he had manners that came from an earlier generation. Oliver was one of the few men she knew that she truly considered a gentleman.

So what was it about her that turned him cold? She didn't know, but his attitude really hurt.

She knew through the ever-active grapevine that he'd been helping Pansy Parker with her yard work since he'd moved next door to her. Today, he'd even attended church with her. What kind of young man had time like that for old ladies? Especially a man who looked like him? He had hunk written all over his 6' 2" frame. He was tanned and toned from all the running he still did. Add in broad shoulders, close cropped blonde hair, a strong jaw and crystal blue eyes and his physical appeal couldn't be denied.

Orchard Hill's single women were all ready to fall for the new gym teacher—though he hadn't thrown out so much as a crumb of encouragement to one of them.

“Thanks for doing this with me, Aunt Hope,” said Abby “I know the team is supposed to be co-ed, but there are usually so many more guys than girls.”

“It’s no problem, Abby,” Hope assured her, her eyes still on Oliver’s retreating back. “I love to play. It’ll be fun.”

Later, at home, Oliver sat on the edge of his bed and held the Bible in his hands. His mother had sent it to him last week, and he hadn’t opened it yet. It was well worn, with faded gold edging on the pages and a broken spine. If he opened the book, Oliver knew he would find many passages underlined in black or red ink and the margin filled with notes.

It had belonged to his uncle.

Uncle Gabe had come to live with him and his mom the summer before Oliver started junior high. He rarely saw his dad. The man was divorcing wife #2 at that time. His mom was working long hours to make ends meet, and when Uncle Gabe moved in, Oliver had been starving for some adult attention.

He ran his hands over the Bible. It was Uncle Gabe who had first taken him to church, who made him go to confirmation classes and join the youth group. It was also Gabe who had taught him how to hit a baseball, throw a football and took him running—laying the foundation for his success in track, success that had earned him a scholarship.

But, Gabe died five years ago, and even though his mom’s note said she’d only just found the bible during some spring cleaning, it was strange that she would send it now at the exact time Mrs. Parker had asked him to go to church when he hadn’t been in years.

There wasn’t any special reason that he hadn’t gone to church in so long. He was so busy in college, and in the years following that, he just hadn’t taken the time to find a church. Somehow it hadn’t seemed important then.

But now, Oliver felt like he wanted more stability in his life. He wanted a home that he could call his own and a community that he could be part of.

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Church represented a part of that community. He'd been telling the truth when he said he was glad Mrs. Parker had asked him to come.

But he still hadn't opened the book. He hadn't stopped missing his uncle in the years since his death. Opening the book, seeing Gabe's handwriting and reading his notes, it would bring back the fact that Gabe was gone.

Oliver put down the book and decided to go running instead.

Hope's brother, Joseph, was a very traditional person. He saw himself as head of the family since their parents had retired to Florida, and that meant a family dinner around his table on every Sunday. Everyone had a job for Sunday dinner. Hope's job usually was to bring a salad. Joseph made the main course. His teenage kids, Noah, Abby and Peter took turns clearing the table and doing dishes as well as helping make side dishes.

Recently, their Sunday dinner crowd had expanded by three, Hope's nieces Dorinda, Lucinda and Belinda. They were her sister's six year old triplet daughters. Today, Hope was attempting to teach them how to set the table. It wasn't going well.

"Why do we have to do this anyway?" whined Dori.

"Yeah," Lucy chimed in. "Why can't we just use paper plates? That's what we always do at home."

Hope tried not to think about what their home life had been like for the last few years. She should be glad Theresa had kept the children fed, and not worry about what they were eating from, but the constant ache of guilt in her heart increased every time she thought of her sister. She should have known Theresa wasn't all right and should have gone to be with her. But she hadn't, and now her sister, after years of using alcohol to numb her own grief over her husband's death, was in a treatment facility as required by her sentence from one too many drunk driving charges.

Joseph, himself widowed, insisted on taking the

girls. It was that head of the family thing again, Hope knew, although she thought she should have been the one to provide for them. Joseph already had three kids. Hope was alone. She'd be able to give more time to them. But Joseph had insisted, and she'd lost that battle.

"We use paper plates once in a while," Hope explained to the girls. "But for Sundays especially, your Uncle Joseph likes to use the real dishes. OK?"

Dori gave a loud huff. "I guess so. Let's put them on the table."

"I think the dishes are pretty, Aunt Hope," said Belle in a quiet voice.

"Once we have the plates on, we'll put on napkins, silverware and glasses."

"This would be a lot easier if Uncle Joseph would just get lunch at the drive through on the way home from church." Dori was definitely a handful. Hope reminded herself—yet again—that the girls had been neglected for the past couple of years, and that moving to a strange town to live with relatives who were practically strangers had to be difficult for them.

"Uncle Joseph's dinner will be way better than anything you could get from a fast food place," Hope said firmly.

Dori shrugged. "Whatever."

No less than five arguments later, the table was set and dinner was ready. The food was brought out and everyone took their places at the table. Joseph sat at the head, Hope at the foot. The triplets lined one side of the table and the teens the other. Noah, Joseph's oldest was seventeen, Abby was fifteen and Peter had just turned fourteen.

Hope caught Lucy's hand as she grabbed for a roll. "Remember, we say grace first."

"There are too many rules in this place," Lucy grumbled. But she folded her hands and bowed her head with the rest of the family, so Hope let it slide.

Once the prayer was said, everyone filled their plates. While they ate, Hope debated about the best way to bring up her idea to Joseph. She found her opening when he asked, "How is your summer going?"

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“So far so good. The summer rec’ programs have started.”

“Right. What did you say you were doing for that?”

“A story time for the younger kids and a reading group for the older ones. The older kids bring a lunch, and we read and discuss books while we eat. It’s a good way to keep the kids reading over the summer.”

“Do you think I could help with story time?” asked Abby.

“Sure, why not,” Hope replied. “I could always use an assistant.”

“You should enjoy your summers while you still can,” Noah broke in. He was working his first job this summer to save for college.

“I am enjoying it,” Abby told him, unruffled. “I like helping Hope.”

“Anyway,” Hope said, feeling the need to steer the conversation back on track, the rec’ program doesn’t take up much of my time, so I was thinking...”

Joseph, as if he sensed what was coming, set his fork down with a sigh. “You were thinking what?”

“Maybe the triplets could stay with me over the summer.” She held her breath, hoping he would agree.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“They’ve had enough disruption in their short lives. I don’t want them moved again.”

“I want to live with Hope,” complained Dori, although Hope wasn’t sure if it was because she really wanted Hope or for the sake of starting an argument.

Lucy, forever following Dori’s lead, added, “Yeah, we wouldn’t have to share the bathroom with so many people there.”

Belle spoke so quietly that Hope almost missed her comment. “But I like being with Abby.”

Ignoring the comments from the peanut gallery, Hope said “It’s not like they’re moving across country. I only live a few blocks away, for crying out loud.”

“I don’t care, Hope. That’s my decision. Kids, if you’re finished you can start clearing the table. We’ll have dessert later.”

Hope fumed as she started to stack plates. He hadn't even considered her offer. She had the least responsibility of the two, why shouldn't she take the triplets?

"Let the kids do that, Hope. It's a beautiful day. Come and sit out on the deck with me."

She put the plates down and followed her brother through the house and out onto his deck. He settled in a chair, but Hope leaned on the railing and stared off into space.

"I can certainly see where Dori gets her stubbornness from," he said lightly.

Hope turned around. "What do you mean?"

"I wish you'd stop asking to take the girls."

"I just don't feel like I'm helping enough."

"They spend the night with you at least once a week. You're playing softball with Abby. All the kids adore you. You help out a lot."

"I could do more."

"I know how good you are with children, but you've never been a parent. It's different. Plus Abby and the boys are old enough to give me a hand with—what do they call them at school?—"The Terrible Trio?"

"Don't call them that," she snapped. "If they hear that enough, they'll start trying to live up to that title."

"I think they already have," said Joseph with a sigh that attested to the storms he'd already weathered with them.

Hope began to pace back and forth on the deck. She was so frustrated with the situation. "Maybe I should move in with you."

"What?"

"I'd be here, then, when the kids need me."

"This house is bursting at the seams as it is. You'd have to sleep in the bathtub. And believe me, that wouldn't help the bathroom situation any."

"The house wouldn't be so crowded if you let the triplets come and live with me."

"Hope..."

There really wasn't any more she could do about

it. Officially, Theresa had left her daughters in Joseph's care.

Joseph got up and crossed the deck to put his arm around her. "You have to stop feeling guilty about Theresa. She created her own problems."

"I could have spent the whole summer with her after Jamie died..."

"You offered. She said 'no.' Hope, you can't just steam roll people. Sometimes they need help, but they don't want it."

Hope turned into him, and he gave her a hug. "You're the baby of the family. Aren't you supposed to be the spoiled, irresponsible one?" he teased.

"My big brother would never let me get away with being spoiled or irresponsible," she mumbled into his shoulder.

"No, I guess you turned out all right, thanks to me."

Hope pulled away from him and punched him on the arm. "Just all right?"

"Better than all right. Let's go see if those dishes are done. Maybe we can get a game of monopoly going." Joseph steered her back into the house, and Hope had to admit she'd lost another battle.

Chapter 2

“Girls, grab your stuff, it’s time to go,” called Hope, anxiously checking her watch. She couldn’t be late for softball practice again, or Oliver would explode. It seemed he had a thing for punctuality. She peered into her living room where her six year old nieces had been watching television a few minutes ago while she paid bills in the office. The TV was on, but there was no one watching it.

“Where can they be?” Hope muttered to herself. She went to the window and quickly scanned her backyard. No sign of them.

She then conducted a room to room search. She was glad they weren’t in the bathroom. There was way too much mess potential there. Then she checked the dining room, the kitchen...

Hope gasped when she saw her kitchen. Drifts of flour covered the counter. She stepped into the room and slid across the floor, crashing into the fridge. Hope looked down and saw that she’d slipped on a broken egg.

She heard three giggles and found her nieces on the floor on the other side of the kitchen island, sharing a bag of chocolate chips. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “They’re children,” she reminded herself. “They’re children who have been deprived of attention and discipline. Theresa is counting on you to help take care of them until she’s well.”

Opening her eyes, Hope said in the calmest voice she could muster, “What are you doing in the kitchen? I thought you were going to watch TV.”

“We were,” said Dori, with a smile that was awfully close to a smirk. “But we got hungry. So we came into the kitchen to get a snack.”

“Let’s cut to the part where you destroyed my

kitchen.”

Dori shrugged, as if it should be obvious. “You didn’t have any cookies. So we decided to make our own.”

“Only it was harder than we thought,” Lucy added. “And so we thought just plain chocolate chips without the cookies would be fine.”

“We didn’t mean to make a mess,” whispered Belle, the sensitive one. She looked sorry, but she had chocolate smeared across her face just like the other two.

“OK, you three know you are not allowed to make anything in the kitchen without an adult.”

“Yes, Aunt Hope,” agreed Dori, nodding in apparent agreement. “Should we use the dining room next time?”

Another deep, calming breath. “Dori, you and your sisters will not prepare any food in any room—or outside—without adult permission and help. Got it?” She gave them her best ‘I mean business’ look. It had, at times, reduced even fifth grade boys to tears. It was one of the most powerful weapons in her arsenal.

It didn’t daunt these three in the least. Lucy looked up at her with wide, deceptively innocent eyes. “Uncle Joseph told us the same thing last week.”

Hope stifled a groan. “Then you knew you were breaking a rule.”

“Oh no,” insisted Dori. “He only meant at his house.”

“That’s a poor excuse. You three are going to have this kitchen spotless in record time,” said Hope, glancing at the clock and deciding that there was no chance of getting to softball practice on time now. She was glad Abby had decided to visit a friend and then walk to practice today. Now, at least, they wouldn’t both be late. Teaching her nieces about discipline was more important than a game anyway.

“Belle, you put away everything you girls took out. Lucy, you wipe down all the cupboards. And Dori,” she held the girl’s defiant gaze. “you will mop up the eggs on the floor.”

“Well, look who finally decided to grace us with her presence,” grumbled Oliver as Hope’s car pulled into the parking lot. He hated that she was always late. He couldn’t concentrate on the game when he was waiting for her show up. He knew it was stupid, but he always worried that she’d had car trouble or something.

Andrew, the principal of the elementary school, was sitting next to him on the bench as they waited for their turn at bat. “I don’t know what you have against Hope,” he said.

“I don’t have anything against her,” Oliver protested. “It’s just rude to be late when your teammates are depending on you to be at practice.”

“She definitely adds something to the game—even before she steps onto the field.”

Oliver glanced at the man lounging down the bench a ways. Jordan Schmidt, a lecherous look in his eye, was definitely checking out Hope as she walked in. He never failed to voice his opinions on a woman’s attributes, often in far cruder language. How did a guy with a mouth like that ever get on a church team?

He decided to ignore the comment.

Hope arrived, breathless and apologetic. “Sorry to be late again, but...”

“Save the excuses,” Oliver snapped. “Just get here on time next practice.”

“I have a perfectly good reason...”

“It doesn’t matter what your reason is. You were still late.”

Hope pressed her lips together and sat on the bench next to Andrew. The team had been split in half so they could play a practice game. Pastor Isaac headed up the team whose members included, besides Hope, Oliver, Abby, Jordan Schmidt, Andrew Thomas, Kevin Fielding, Sarah Rogers, Riley and Ian O’Neil, and Jeff Bradley. Hope’s niece was up to bat. Oliver watched as she earned two strikes. He got up from the bench and jogged up to the plate. Signaling to the pitcher to wait, Oliver helped Abby adjust her stance and her grip on the bat. “That should help.”

On her next try, Abby got a hit and made it to

first base. She gave Oliver a thumbs up and a big grin. This was the kind of thing Oliver lived for—helping kids succeed. Succeeding in sports gave them confidence and skills they could use in real life. He should know. His uncle having coached him had saved Oliver from sitting at the nerd table in the lunchroom throughout junior high. It was Oliver’s personal goal to make the nerd table—which was really nothing more than an island for the outcasts of the school—nonexistent in lunchrooms everywhere. Not necessarily by getting all kids into sports, but by helping kids to find confidence in themselves and showing them that everyone had value.

Of course Abby wasn’t technically a kid anymore. She was a beautiful young woman just like her aunt.

And there he was, back to Hope again.

She was up to bat. She passed him on his way back to the bench and gave him a luminous smile. “Thanks for helping Abby.”

Were any of God’s angels as beautiful as she was? “No problem,” he mumbled and kept going.

People had shuffled around since he got up and the only place left to sit was the end of the bench—by Jordan Schmidt. Reluctantly, Oliver sat down.

Jordan elbowed him in the ribs and said out of the side of his mouth, “Aren’t you going to help her with her stance? I’d take any excuse to put my arms around her. Hope Velasquez is one hot babe.”

Oliver didn’t have a civil answer to that comment, so again he said nothing, hoping his silence would give Jordan a clear message.

Unfortunately picking up on the subtleties of interpersonal communications was not one of Jordan’s strong points. “Too bad she’s so stuck up. We went to high school together. I must have asked her out a dozen times. She always turned me down.”

Oliver bit his lip to prevent himself from saying that this only proved she had good judgment, not that she was a snob.

“But we’ve been out of school a long time. Maybe she’s come around since then.”

There was a crack as the bat connected with the