

Mon Pauvre, Edmond

by Merry Grace

The village of Boussoe has a new schoolteacher and an old phantom - or is he? Will the new schoolteacher redeem the phantom, or discover the hard way that he is past redemption?

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 2

The village of Boussoe has a new schoolteacher and an old phantom - or is he? Will the new schoolteacher redeem the phantom, or discover the hard way that he is past redemption?

A man sat in the parlour of his house one evening, taking his tea. The room was small, but comfortable, with a fireplace at one end, a sofa facing it some feet back, a low table in front of it. The tea things were positioned to a nicety there, and two gloriously comfortable red armchairs reposed on either side of the fireplace. It was one of these two chairs, the right one, to be precise, on which the man was seated. His companion, a young girl of twenty-six or so, sat in the left one. Her wrists were tied to its arms.

The girl, twisting her wrists around inside the well-made rope, sighed in apparent boredom. "I have never accused you of being normal, Monseigneur," she said, "but I believe you have carried your eccentricity to... I believe I shall call it a straining point."

"No, you have never called me normal, but you have accused me of something far worse."

"My dear Monseigneur, what could be worse than normal?"

"I believe you will recall having called me a good man on more than one occasion, despite my attempts to convince you that I am nothing of the sort."

"Oh," the girl said, trying to quell the fear that had been slowly building in her for the past half an hour. "Is that what you are doing?" she said heartily. "Attempting to convince me you are not good?"

"No, my dear. I am succeeding."

The girl attempted to laugh.

In Which We Meet Marianne

Chapter 2 of 2

In which we meet Marianne.

It was just a year and a half ago when Marianne de Saint-Matthieu came to the small village of Boussoac at dusk, riding a handsome brown mare, with two bandboxes slung over her saddlebow. The child who saw her as she rode past his cottage exclaimed that there was a strange girl riding through town. His mother, joining his side at the window, remarked at her unsightly plethora of freckles, which marred an otherwise lovely complexion, poor girl.

"But why is she here, Maman?"

"It is that she is the new schoolteacher."

"The schoolteacher does not come until tomorrow."

"She is early. If you tell *le maitre* she is here, he will give you a sou, perhaps."

Exclaiming an incoherent burst of delight, the child ran to the chateau of Messire le Comte du Chartier.

Shortly thereafter, du Chartier was riding his fine steed at a moderate pace, toward the old schoolhouse.

Marianne was rubbing down her mare with a handful of grass by the large oak tree which overshadowed the forlorn little school. Looking up at the sound of hoofbeats, she was met with a tall, well-muscled man, appearing to have attained his fiftieth year, who smiled warmly as he swung down from the saddle.

"Bonsoir, mademoiselle. I am called Guillaume du Chartier; I am the magistrate of Boussoac."

Offering her hand, she smiled and the old comte was suddenly aware that her freckles were no longer blemishes, but ornaments, sprinkled judiciously across her nose and cheekbones, and her hair, previously perceived as bushy, was now seen to be thick, lustrous, chestnut curls, which gleamed in the fading sun. Her nose also was not just a tad too large but showed character in its charming retroussé tilt and her firm chin showed strength of integrity.

Hazel eyes gleamed mischievously in the few seconds during which the comte was rapidly undergoing a second first impression. Having emerged unscathed from his reverie, he claimed the proffered hand and kissed it gallantly as the enchanting young lady informed him with a huge air of pleasure, "I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Monsieur le Comte. I am called Marianne de Saint-Matthieu; I answered your advertisement for your new school."

"Yes, yes, I was, though, expecting someone a bit older...?"

She frowned in puzzlement. "I am six and twenty, Monsieur le Comte; I said so in my letter."

"You are six and twenty! Of course, of course, forgive me. Well, I must now give you the key," taking this out of his pocket, "and show you the building, yes?"

"I would love to see it, Messire. Indeed, I am excessively eager to begin my duties."

Having shown her the single floored architecture, with its large front room full of desks and the small back room containing a bed, nightstand, and a singularly beautiful rocking chair, the pair stood at the door as the comte finished his monologue.

"As you can see, a few of the windows are still cracked, the whole building needs painting and the desks are in need of repair, etc, etc. There is a man in the village who will take care of these things, but he prefers to work after evenings. He will not bother you, however, he is almost unnaturally silent when he wishes to be. A very strange man..." the comte trailed off, frowning, his eyes gleaming sadly. "*Le pauvre* Edmond... I think he has had a very hard time of it." Shaking himself, he laughed. "You must forgive the ramblings of a man in his dotage, mademoiselle."

"Of course, messire," she responded in kind.

Chuckling her firm chin, he chuckled, called her a saucy *jeune fille* and called out as he walked to his house, "If there is anything you require, do not hesitate to ask *Bonne nuit, mademoiselle, et avez-vous les beaux rêves.*"

"*Bonne nuit, monsieur,*" she called.

It was ten o'clock, and the few village lights Marianne could see from her fractured bedroom window had been extinguished an hour ago. Lighting the bit of candle she had saved, she ventured out with it into the schoolroom, sat behind the large oak desk at the front of the room facing the door, and waited.

The wooden door swung open suddenly, and a very tall, almost painfully thin man entered the room, his arms loaded with bulky paraphernalia. Leaving the candle on the desk, Marianne wrapped her shawl more tightly around her shoulders and trod softly toward the man. As quiet as she thought she had been, she had not gone three steps when the man spun around so swiftly, Marianne pressed a hand to her heart and laughed aloud in her startlement.

"*Pardonnez-moi, monsieur,* are you all right?"

"Who are you?" he demanded harshly.

Taken aback, she said, "I am the new schoolteacher, Monsieur."

"I am not an imbecile; I had suspected as much. What is your name, and why are you disturbing my work instead of sleeping?"

Refusing to be affronted, she said, "I am called Marianne de Saint-Matthieu; I did not know I was disturbing your work, but I am thrilled to know I may be of such use, and it is my custom to keep late hours."

He snorted. "Ladies do not keep late hours. None but whores do so."

She clapped her hands. "But you are delightfully rude!"

"Very well," he said silkily, turned and began his repairs on the windows.

Venturing closer, she asked, peering up at what she could see of the many angular planes of his face in the dark. "What is your name?"

He angled his face away from her. "De la Salle."

"The comte said your name was Edmond," she said contrarily. He did not reply.

She moved around him, attempting to see his face in the moonlight offered by the window. Quickly, he stepped back into the shadows, and lifting his chin haughtily, vociferated explosively, "Damn, Madam, you are impertinent!"

"It is mademoiselle," she said, demurely, following him. "And you are very haughty. I think I shall call you Monseigneur, if you do not object."

He continued backing away as she followed him. "Hell and damnation, why do you insist on seeing my face?" he demanded angrily, a note of panic lacing his tone.

"It is not appropriate to curse in front of a lady," she objected. Edmond was now backed against the desk, and there he stopped. "But I forgive you. Why will you not let me see your face?"

He paused, his breathing agitated. "*Bon*," he said softly, his body tensed. "You wish to see my face? *Voilà*, Mademoiselle." On the word, he lifted her candle to illuminate his face.

Beneath thick dark hair and eyebrows, two parallel scars interrupted the right corners of otherwise well-molded lips and a deep-set, fudge-colored eye. Offering the other side of his face for her inspection, she discovered the corresponding eye to be un-maimed, though beyond it painful looking burn scars grasped his jaw and side of his face, cut into his hairline and reached out toward his large, hooked nose. Her eyes wandering lower, she saw the large, ugly scar stretching down his neck and into his collar.

"How very interesting," she remarked.