You tired, you poor

Brigitte Dutertre de la Montagne de Pouzy raised her lavender-perfumed handkerchief up to her nose and breathed in deep. Unlike the hundreds of people filling the registration hall, she was not excited to find herself on Ellis Island. Of course not. It was humiliating to be in this mass of uncultured and frankly pungeant individuals.

Had Brigitte understood the inscription on the Statue of Liberty, she would have found it an apt description to her fellow immigrants:

'Give me your tired, your Poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore'.

Brigitte might be financially embarrassed, she was fatigued and indeed desperate to breathe free, but she was not 'wretched refuse'.

By rights, she should have been in First Class on board the Queen Victoria with individuals more like herself. It was obvious that any member of the Dutertre de la Montagne de Pouzy family was First Class material even if she only had a Third Class ticket. A private cabin, cocktails, dinner at the Captain's table – that was the world to which Brigitte belonged. First Class passengers did not come to Ellis Island, but simply disembarked in New York. First Class passengers did not have to ask permission to enter the United States, or submit to medical examination as if they were horses for sale.

The queue moved forward a pace. Brigitte was now only one person away from the fat immigration official's desk.

"Family name?" the official said to the young man in front, who Brigitte recognized from the Queen Victoria. He too was French, having got on board with her at Le Havre. She supposed he was about seventeen.

"Meriguet." The young man replied.

Meriguet, Brigitte thought to herself, How very…agricultural. A boy his age should have been preparing to fight the Germans. What was to become of France if all the farmers's boys ran off to America instead of sacrificing themselves for their country?

"First name?"

"Alfonse."

It was an outrage that she was obliged to mix with an Alphonse Meriguet and two thousand other assorted peasants. […]The war-evading farmer was handed his documents, stamped and formal, and went through the exit door. Brigitte stepped forward.

"Family name?" the fat official said without looking up.

"Dutertre de la Montagne de Pouzy."Brigitte announced.

The man looked slowly up, pushing back his cap.

"Say what, lady?" he frowned.

Brigitte heard the people in the queue behind her snigger.

"Dutertre de la Montagne de Pouzy." She repeated , "Mademoiselle."

"You speak English?" he asked.

Brigitte held up her hand, finger and thumb almost touching.

"Small." She answered.

"Oh Jeez…" he whistled, "I just need your name, lady, not your life story. What is your…name?"

"Yes!" Brigitte nodded, "My name ees Dutertre de la Montagne de Pouzy!"

The people behind her were fighting back their laughter.

"Okay." The official shrugged, "If you say so".

He picked up his pen and filled in the box:

"Du…ma…poo…zi." He said, "okay…first name, please?"

Brigitte looked in horror at how the idiotic man had massacred the family name: Dumapoozi. Mademoiselle Dumapoozi. She was about to take the pen from him and write it properly, but then stopped herself.

It was over, she realized. That life, that family, that history… Whatever the future might hold, that was all over now. She was in America, that land of new beginnings, and perhaps… Perhaps it would be good to set herself free.

"Bridget." She smiled, "Bridget Dumapoozi."

She turned to look at the people behind her, and laughed with them.

A short story by Rupert Morgan (2008)