

**Sample Translation (Pages 9-34)**

## **BRETON PRIDE. THE FOURTH CASE OF COMMISSAIRE DUPIN**

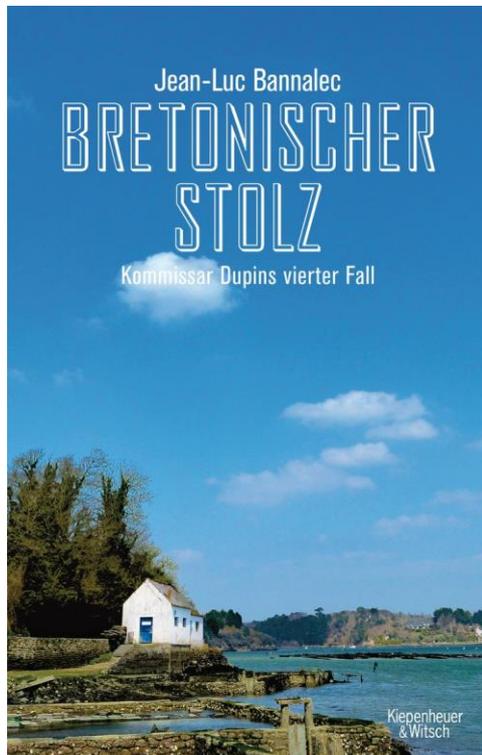
**by Jean-Luc Bannalec**

novel

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Jean-Luc Bannalec: Bretonischer Stolz

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## DAY 1

He was the biggest of them all. His call was loud, harsh, monosyllabic. The upward thrust of his head was pure self-assertion. His imperious cry was aimed at a companion peering out from behind a rocky outcrop, who now came hurrying forth. It was cold, around zero degrees; the air smelled of damp ice.

Commissaire Georges Dupin of the Concarneau police was face to face with him, and was decidedly impressed. For all his swagger, this creature in front of him, surely a good metre tall, was a truly imposing sight.

Black head, penetrating brown eyes, black throat. Luminous splashes of yellowy orange on the back of his head. His beak long and noble-looking, dark-coloured on the top, deep orange underneath. His chest a strident yellowy orange; below that, dazzling whiteness. From neck to tail his back was slate-grey, shimmering and silvery, his flippers likewise. His feet and legs, however, were the same coal-black as his head. An exquisite spectacle: a king penguin in all his majesty.

His companion, a touch smaller, had meanwhile joined him: penguins identified one another by their voices, as Dupin well knew.

Both of them suddenly began to squawk, a volley of short, jagged cries. They were meant as a warning, that was clear. Dupin thought for a moment that they were directed at him — but he was wrong. On the other side of the jutting rock in the snow-covered Arctic Pavilion stood three of his favourite type of penguins: gentoos. What with the gentoos and a collection of rockhoppers, the *Océanopolis* here on the outskirts of Brest offered the biggest colony of penguins in Europe, and Dupin, a dedicated penguin fan, made a detour there every few months when his duties took him in the Brest direction. He was accompanied on this occasion by Henri, who in the course of time had become his closest friend in this place he now had to call 'home'; a Parisian like him, Henri had come to the end of the earth more than twenty years earlier, in pursuit of happiness and the love of his life. 'Everything begins at the end of the earth', as the saying has it, 'Tout commence au Finistère'; one of those Breton adages that put things in a nutshell: that's how people think and feel in this part of the world.

Commissaire Dupin was on his way to a 'further-training seminar' for police officers in Brest that irritatingly enough was a pre-requisite for his 'professional advancement', though he still didn't have the faintest idea what this 'advancement' might consist of. By special order of his chief he had been given the title of 'Senior Commissaire', notwithstanding the fact that as far back as anyone could remember there had only ever been one commissaire at the Concarneau police station. In consequence it was small and easy to control — as well as being allegedly the only police station in France to offer a panoramic view of the ocean (a claim that had never yet been verified). It also looked out on the *ville close* and its massive ramparts right in the centre of the harbour. Small and easily controlled though it was, its official operating area had been steadily enlarged in recent years,

what with the retirement of commissaires in neighbouring towns and the severe squeeze on public expenditure. Dupin's promotion had almost coincided with the fifth anniversary of his posting to Brittany. Things had been 'not bad', the *Préfet* had mumbled in his 'congratulatory' phone call, and the results Dupin had 'turned in' had been 'satisfactory'; one could even say that Dupin and he, the *Préfet*, 'had succeeded between them in achieving some quite decent investigative outcomes'. Dupin's career in Brittany had begun on the 1st of March five years earlier, following the nasty business of his 'transfer' from the metropolis — the reasons for which had become the focus of an ever more tangled web of improbable legends.

The theme of the training programme — specifically chosen for him by the Prefecture as a 'special bonus' — was 'The systematic-systemic conduct of the interrogation process'. Needless to say, the programme was based on the very latest insights of scientific research in psychology. Dupin was positively notorious for his unconventional and no doubt utterly unpsychological interrogation methods, which — whatever else they might be — were never 'systematic', at any rate not in the usual sense of the word.

But attendance at the course was compulsory, and Dupin's promotion *had* been accompanied by an attractive if not exactly lavish increase in salary. So his hand had been forced. And Dupin therefore wouldn't have felt the slightest hesitation in skipping that day's introductory session even if it hadn't coincided with the plan dreamt up by Henri, who was due to attend a meeting of gastronomes not far from Brest.

The two king penguins now started waddling towards the three gentoos, who on seeing this development appeared to use their flippers to communicate with one another, and took a death-defying leap into the adjacent pool. In a spirit of provocative cheerfulness they raced off in different directions at breakneck speed and with crazy twists and turns, then abruptly turned around and shot back with great bravado to form a single group again before disappearing down one of the channels that led to other pools. The whole performance had lasted barely five seconds. Birds that on land looked ungainly, and in the course of evolution had even lost their ability to fly, showed themselves to be easily the fastest and most skilful swimming machines in all creation once they were back in their natural element. Streamlined to perfection, they could achieve speeds of forty kilometres per hour, as Dupin well knew. They could dive for twenty-two minutes on a single breath, and reach depths of five hundred metres. Dupin read every book he could find on penguins, and had all the facts and figures at his fingertips, just as he'd known everything about cars when he was a child. He was particularly impressed by penguins' orientational skills. With their sharp eyes and matchless mnemonic techniques they are able to memorise underwater details of the sea floor and the ice layer over huge areas, and at any given moment always know where the nearest hole is that will enable them to surface — knowledge essential to their survival (and pretty useful for a police commissaire, too). Equally essential was their ability to maintain a constant body temperature of thirty degrees even when the air temperature around them was a diabolical  $-180$ , together with raging storms, darkness for weeks on end, and no food — a situation too horrible to contemplate, thought Dupin.

Henri and Dupin had tried to keep the three gentoos in sight, but had lost track of them. They were

just about to turn away when all three suddenly shot out of the water in a mighty leap to land behind the two king penguins. A moment later they were firmly stationed on top of the icy outcrop — it was just like something from a film. The gentoos clearly hadn't scattered randomly — they had worked out a cunning plan. Penguins are hard to beat when it comes to teamwork.

The two king penguins looked distinctly irritated. For a moment it looked as if they were weighing up whether to launch an attack of some sort as they demonstratively drew themselves up to their full height. The larger of the two emitted a few harsh cries. Then suddenly, again without warning, they slid head first into the water, calmly, almost indolently, and finally, after bobbing up for a last look around, swam away.

The outcrop — which was also the feeding station — now belonged to the three gentoos.

'They certainly know what's what', grinned Dupin.

'Yes', laughed Henri, 'intelligence comes up trumps in the end!'

Brittany's penguin colony was the largest in Europe, but what was even more spectacular was the fact that they were all *French* penguins. They came from French territory, namely the sub-arctic Iles Crozet — and even more importantly, these islands were in truth a Breton archipelago! They had been discovered in the eighteenth century by a naval officer, Julien-Marie Crozet, from the Morbihan area, not far from the famous Golfe du Morbihan: a Breton! These penguins were all Bretons — which meant in turn that there was a genuine bit of Brittany in the Antarctic! That might sound strange to beginners in the lore of Brittany — but it caused Dupin not the least surprise, since in the course of the last few years he had already become aware of the Brittany in the South Seas, not to mention those in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean and Australia. It was one of the fundamental doctrines of Nolwenn, his PA, that 'There isn't just *one* Brittany — there are lots of them!'

'Did you know that penguins have such explosive acceleration that they can leap two metres out of the water? Weapons engineers have taken a leaf out of their book to optimise torpedo-firing systems, and...'

Dupin's enthusiastic explanations were interrupted by the high-pitched buzz of his mobile phone. He reluctantly extracted it from his pocket. It was Nolwenn.

'Yes?'

'It's totally unacceptable, Monsieur le Commissaire! It's just not on!'

Something serious was in the air — that much was clear. Dupin had seldom experienced such an outburst during his years in Concarneau, but there was no doubt that his PA — a thoroughly good egg who normally stayed calm and controlled even in the trickiest of situations — was in a state of great agitation. She drew a deep breath and let rip: 'In a few days' time the very last lighthouse keeper in France will leave his lighthouse! From now on they're all going to be computer-controlled. They're not even going to be called lighthouses any more, they're going to be "DirnNAMO"!'!

‘Nolwenn, I ...’

‘An entire profession gone. Finished. No more lighthouse keepers! Jean-Paul Eymond and Serge Andron have lived in their lighthouse sixty-seven and a half metres above the sea for thirty-five years, enduring extreme storms with waves bursting right over the lantern room, when all they could do was pray. They’ve so often had to go out in weather like that to make repairs, risking their lives to save the lives of others! Are these computers going to go out in the middle of a violent storm to mend broken cables and replace shattered lantern glass?’ She drew another deep breath. ‘Lighthouse keepers — they’re important figures in our history, Monsieur le Commissaire! — I repeat: it’s totally unacceptable!’

This was indeed sad news, but it wasn’t at all clear to Dupin what Nolwenn expected him to do about it. Were the police supposed to intervene? Did she want him to arrest someone?

‘Is it a murder? Has something awful happened?’ Henri spoke in muted tones, keen to be discreet, yet bursting with curiosity. Dupin’s face had clearly transmitted some element of Nolwenn’s agitation, or perhaps simply displayed his own bafflement. He gave a calming wave of the hand.

‘Are you in the study centre yet, Monsieur le Commissaire?’ Within a split second Nolwenn’s tone had completely changed. It was now perfectly matter-of-fact, without a trace of emotion. Dupin had experienced this with Nolwenn before. At the mention of the words ‘study centre’, Dupin had visions of brown melamine tables dotted with flower-patterned thermos flasks containing vile-tasting lukewarm coffee already several hours old. On the other hand, though, Dupin had been given strict instructions only the week before to stay off coffee completely for a month, and then — in the words of his no-nonsense GP, Dr. Garreg — to ‘*drastically* reduce’ his ‘excessive consumption’. By no means for the first time, Garreg had diagnosed acute inflammation of his stomach lining, type C gastritis, a painful condition — and painful it certainly was. But Garreg had identified not merely gastritis, but also and more fundamentally a ‘serious physiological addiction to caffeine exhibiting prototypical symptoms’. What a ridiculous idea! And in any case, denying Dupin coffee was a nightmarish imposition which, if obeyed to the letter, was capable of tipping him into a grave psychological crisis — far more grave than these alleged symptoms of a non-existent caffeine addiction! So he had done a private deal with himself to have just one *petit café* each morning, on the basis that a *petit café* wasn’t really a coffee at all.

‘I, er... — No, I’m...’

‘I can hear the penguins.’

Nolwenn said this without a trace of irony. Dupin sometimes had a sneaking feeling that she tracked him with a GPS device of some sort: he wouldn’t put it past her.

‘The seminar begins in precisely three minutes, Monsieur le Commissaire.’

‘I know.’

‘Good. Riwal needs to speak to you. It’s about the break-in at the bank last night.’

‘Any developments?’

Someone had broken into a bank in a tiny out-of-the-way town and instead of just stealing the cash from the ATM they had taken the entire ATM. It would have required some pretty hefty gear, and all in all it didn’t sound like a particularly clever plan.

‘He and Inspector Kadege have paid a visit to the bank, they’ve just arrived back.’

‘Tell him I’ll call him from the car in a minute or two.’

‘I hope you have an enjoyable day, Monsieur le Commissaire.’

Nolwenn hung up.

Henri sent an enquiring glance in Dupin’s direction.

‘Nothing important.’

‘I have to be going’, Henri remarked, and turned towards the exit.

‘Yes, me too.’

Dupin trailed after his friend. He was reluctant to leave. But it was no good. He’d just have to put up with this dratted seminar.

The rain came from all possible directions — from left and right, from in front and behind, from down below, and even — from time to time, and as if by chance — from above. It was quite unique: there weren’t any individual droplets, it wasn’t the sort of rain that you can see, it was an infinity of unbroken, tendril-like streams of water that wormed their way unerringly into one’s clothes, driven by a capricious, constantly shifting wind. There weren’t even any clouds to be seen: the sky was a single mass of murky, miserable grey, a leaden behemoth lying inordinately low over the land. It was a phenomenon that almost never occurred in Brittany, and what Dupin found especially mortifying was that it went together so perfectly with the study centre. What’s more, there was the *smell* of rain; the entire world was musty with the smell of rain.

The thirty metres from the door of the main building to the entrance booth where Dupin and Henri were now sheltering had been enough for them to be soaked right through to their underclothes. In the old days in Paris rain had simply been rain, and it was only once he had arrived in Brittany that Dupin had discovered what *real* rain was like — and the same applied to clouds, the sky, the light. It applied to all the elements, and to all his senses. He had learned to differentiate between a huge variety of types of rain, just as the Bretons themselves did, like the Eskimos with snow. Even worse than pelting rain was that full-on, extreme sort of drizzle known as *le crachin* that one can scarcely see and becomes aware of only by dint of getting totally soaked within a matter of seconds. One thing that Dupin had come to realise — though it seemed a rather irrelevant insight on a day like this — was that it didn’t rain anywhere near as much in these parts as stubborn and unkind prejudice

would have it. Only recently he had read in a Paris newspaper that ‘there are only two seasons in Brittany: a short period of long downpours, and a long period of short ones’. All serious scientific statistics showed such slanderous claims to be complete rubbish. Brittany, or the southern part of it at any rate, had less annual rainfall than the Côte d’Azur. The decisive fact of the matter, however, was that Bretons simply didn’t take any notice of rain — a wise point of view, in Dupin’s opinion. This wasn’t because they were already so accustomed to rain — no, there were two reasons behind it, both of them of great significance: firstly, it was just weather, and there were more important concerns in life, such as life itself: no one in these parts would dream of calling off any of the countless local festivals and festivities just because it was raining; secondly, it went totally against the grain of Bretons to let ‘external’ factors determine their behaviour, whether it be centralistic diktats from Paris or simply the weather. Herein lay the origins of one of the Bretons’ most endearing sayings, routinely wheeled out to attack outsiders moaning about the rain: ‘En Bretagne il ne pleut que sur les cons’ — ‘In Brittany it only rains on idiots’. According to a list drawn up by the wonderful magazine *Bretons*, going out into pelting rain without even noticing it is one of the ten key markers that serve to identify a Breton beyond any doubt — alongside other clues such as making a huge fuss if the butter isn’t salted, suggesting a drink within two minutes of meeting someone, or pulling out a *Gwenn ha Du* — the Breton flag — and calling a Breton Assembly the minute twenty-plus people are gathered together in one place.

Dupin’s and Henri’s cars were parked alongside each other in the first row of the gigantic car park which, at 5 o’clock on an ordinary Tuesday a week before Easter, was more or less empty.

The loud, shrill tones of Dupin’s mobile rang out again.

‘Oh, great!’

He pulled the phone from his jeans pocket. The display was all streaks and smears: he hoped the thing was waterproof. He got through at least two mobiles a year on average, and this one was only a month old; it was his first ever smart-phone — a minor revolution, instigated by Nolwenn.

It was Riwal’s number on the screen. No surprise there. But this wasn’t a good moment: they had to be on their way.

‘I don’t want to get there too late, Georges’, declared Henri, readying himself for the second sprint of the day: the cars were some twenty metres away. ‘I need to make the case for Breton speck. I’m determined to get it through. Nothing touches it for taste! Especially the stuff that *Terre et Paille* produce in Bossulan.’

There really wasn’t any point waiting to see if these torrential squalls were going to abate.

Dupin let the phone carry on ringing, knowing that the call would be diverted to Nolwenn. Despite the unpleasant conditions they found themselves in, Henri’s remark had made Dupin’s mouth water. The meeting Henri was going to was the annual ceremony that decided which foods or dishes would feature in that year’s ‘Semaine du goût’, in the course of which four or five specific foods would be ‘celebrated’ in schools and canteens, and also in restaurants — an act of homage to France’s sheer infinitude of sensuous delights.

'Speck is the be all and end all!' pronounced Henri, who clearly had time enough to wax enthusiastic. 'Brown the speck in salted butter in a large casserole and caramelize it lightly with forest honey: for *friko kaol*, a classic Breton cassoulet, speck is the crucial ingredient — along with smoked sausage, potato, onion and savoy cabbage from Lorient. — Hm, I've got the feeling that I'll be proposing some cracking good ideas!'

'I'd be interested in all of them.'

Once again, that shrill monotone sound from his phone.

Riwal, as before.

Dupin hesitated. Perhaps he should answer after all?

'Pop by again sometime soon', said Henri, launching himself into the teeming rain, 'Bye, Georges!'

'See you, Henri.' Dupin was already holding the phone to his ear.

'This isn't a good time, Riwal, we're just...'

'It's about the break-in at the bank. They've...'

'We'll talk about it on the phone later, Riwal.'

'They've nicked the banking terminal by mistake, not the ATM!'

'What do you mean?'

'You know how the two machines look exactly the same — but you get money from one, and you do your banking business with the other. Still no clue as to who did it.'

'So they've nicked a machine that prints out statements?!'

'It doesn't just print statements, you can...'

'How absurd!'

'You can make payments with it, for instance, or...'

'We'll talk about it tomorrow.'

'Fine. I just wanted to put you in the picture. I'll...'

There was a loud bang at Riwal's end, as if a door had been burst open with great force. Riwal fell silent in mid-sentence.

Nothing happened for a moment or two, then Dupin heard a voice — in the background, but very distinct all the same. An imperious, no-nonsense voice. Kadeg, his other Inspector.

'Hang up, right now. We need to inform the Commissaire this instant. It's urgent.' Dupin could make out Kadeg's every word. 'There's a body! Covered in blood. Near the Belon. Lying in the grass near a small car-park. Down by the Pointe de Penquernéo. If you go towards the river mouth from Port

Belon, on the upper footpath that leads to Rosbras' — Kadeg's military manner had given way to his equally characteristic addiction to excessive detail — 'you come to a large field, don't you, then on the right...'

'What's up?' interjected Dupin. 'Riwal, what's going on?'

'I... — Kadeg just came bursting in and announced...'

'Hang up!' Kadeg now seemed to be standing right next to Riwal, bellowing into the phone.

'Kadeg, it's the boss, for God's sake!' protested Riwal despairingly. 'The boss is already on the phone!'

'Riwal, let me speak to Kadeg', Dupin ordered.

Kadeg had the phone to his ear in a flash.

'Monsieur le Commissaire, is that you?'

'Who else would it be? What's happened?'

'There's a man lying...'

'Who is he? What do we know?'

'Nothing. We don't know anything at all. We've only just had the phone call. One of our people in Riec-sur-Bélon. An old lady was walking her dog and saw this man lying motionless in a strange position with lots of blood, as she put it. She rushed to a restaurant as fast as she could because it was closer than her own house and rang from there. *La Coquille*, it's...'

'I know *La Coquille*.'

Kadeg paused, quite unnecessarily.

'Well, go on.'

'Nothing else to report. That's all we know. Two uniforms from Riec are already on their way, they should be there any minute.'

'I... Good. I want a report straightaway. I'll get over there right now. Give me three quarters of an hour. I'll see both of you at the crime scene. Ring me as soon as you have any more information.'

'Certainly, Monsieur le Commissaire.'

'And tell Nolwenn to send me precise details of where this car park is. The one the body's close to.'

'As I mentioned, up on the top of the cliffs if you...'

Dupin cut off the call.

He stood there for a moment, motionless.

'Shit!'

Then he hurried over to his car. At least he'd miss the seminar, and it wouldn't be his fault.

Dupin had just taken the final roundabout before the expressway at 100kph, in the process taking the ancient Citroën XM close to its physical limits, as was clear from its noisy protestations. He would soon be on the expressway itself, the 'Breton motorway', and he wouldn't come off it again until he reached Riec. Nolwenn had already been in touch: as expected, the tiny little roads on the headland at the mouth of the Belon didn't have names. His GPS system wouldn't help. Nolwenn had given him a rough idea of how to get to his destination, and he would ring her again later. The pathologist and a CSI team were already on their way. Dupin hadn't spoken to Nolwenn for very long so as not to block the line. The windscreen wipers were swishing back and forth like crazy, but weren't doing much of a job even so: he really ought to drive more slowly.

The car phone — almost as ancient as the car itself — rang once again.

Dupin's fingers worked the tiny keys.

'Boss, can you hear me?'

'Clear as a bell, Riwal.'

'You can turn round again. There's no dead body after all. False alarm.'

'I beg your pardon?!'

'Seems there's no body out there, boss.'

Dupin sat bolt upright in his seat.

'Is this a joke?'

'The two uniforms from Riec are at the car park. The one where the body's supposed to be. But there's nothing there. No sign of a body — no one dead, no one injured. Nobody there at all. Absolutely no sign of anything untoward having happened. No blood either.'

Dupin had eased his foot off the accelerator pedal slightly. Very slightly.

'What's all that supposed to mean?'

'At the moment we can...'

'Have you talked to the old lady who saw the body? Who is she? What do we know about her?'

It just couldn't be true.

'A former actress. Sophie Bandol. Very famous. She lives in Port Belon, on the edge of the village. A bit eccentric, apparently. And a bit confused sometimes. Or so our local colleague told me.'

‘Sophie Bandol? Sophie Bandol lives in Port Belon?’

Incredible. Dupin revered her and her films, every one of them. She was one of the great French film actresses of the golden years of the 20th century, up there with Jeanne Moreau, Catherine Deneuve, Brigitte Bardot, Isabelle Huppert. But he’d assumed she lived in Paris or on the Côte d’Azur.

‘Yes. She’s lived there for ages. Though she’s not from around here. She’s a Parisian.’

Rather beside the point, that particular detail.

‘Is she with the two police?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Perhaps they’re not at the right place.’

‘They know every corner of that area. And the description they had was extremely precise. Apparently Madame Bandol walks that way every day.’

‘I want to speak to her, Riwal. Get her to the car park. Right now. I’ll be there any minute.’

‘I... Fine. I’ll tell the men from Riec. Kadeg and I are approaching Trégunc, do you want us to...’

‘Absolutely. I want to see everyone. Right there at the crime scene.’

‘Perhaps someone simply injured himself in some way and needed to lie down for a while before going off home. — It’s possible, surely.’

Dupin snorted.

It was possible.

‘And then again, Sophie Bandol is pretty old — a good eighty, I reckon; people get some funny ideas at that age.’

‘So you think she’s no longer all there? That she’s imagined the whole thing?’

‘It’s possible.’

Theoretically, yes; of course it is.

‘How close was she to the body?’

‘No idea. And as I said, there doesn’t seem to *be* a body.’

‘Perhaps the body’s been made to disappear?’

‘Disappear?’ Riwal sounded lost for words — and just a little bit, too, as if he were beginning to doubt his boss’s sanity.

‘See you soon, Riwal.’

Dupin immediately hung up.

He leaned back in his seat.

Even if it really had been a false alarm and there'd never been a body at all, or any other occurrence of interest to the police, this still had to be confirmed beyond doubt given that a report had come in. A formal confirmation was definitely called for. So he had no choice but to take a look at the alleged crime scene. Theoretically speaking he could delegate this to his inspectors. But then he'd have to go back to the seminar. And in any case, the strangest things sometimes happened.

Dupin pressed the accelerator right down to the floor.

Thirty-five minutes later the tyres of the Citroën squealed as Dupin brought it to a halt on the crumbling tarmac of the car park below Goulet-Riec.

'Thanks, Nolwenn. I've made it. I'll call you later.'

Dupin hung up. As always, Nolwenn's directions had been perfect.

Around Quimper it had suddenly and unexpectedly become much lighter, the oppressive banks of grey becoming steadily more tenuous and translucent the closer he came to the sea. The rain had stopped. By the time he left the expressway the grey had broken up and revealed a magical silvery sky, delicate, flawless — crystalline, that was the word. It was a colour, a shade, that only appeared in the spring. The various seasons, indeed the individual months of the year, all had their particular sky colours.

The change in the weather couldn't have been more typically Breton. Dupin would have sworn that the miserable downpour would go on for days; all the signs had pointed that way, and that's how it had felt, too.

At the far end of the car park on the right hand side were three police vehicles: the Peugeots of his two inspectors — Kadeg and Riwal both made a point of always going in their own cars — while the third vehicle had to be the car of the officers from Riec. Dupin had come to a stop just short of the car park, half on the grass verge and half on the road.

There was no one to be seen.

Dupin got out, stood motionless for a moment, and drew a deep breath.

It was wonderful. Everything was back as it should be — the sky, the light, the sense of infinite space. The Atlantic was very close.

Even here along the river you could smell the salt in the air, you could smell algae, seaweed, minerals. In the context of his last big case Dupin had had to find out in minute detail about the composition of seawater, and had been enormously impressed: no wonder life had originated there! He could hear the waves crashing on the rocks. In an onshore wind you could hear them from a long way inland — every single wave. If there was anything in the world that might induce in Dupin a sense of profound peace — and it was not something he was likely to actually achieve in this life — it

would be meditation inspired by ocean waves.

Dupin made his way to the centre of the slightly sloping car park. At the further end was an opening onto a path that led upwards between gnarled oaks already adorned with garish buds. Two narrow, stony lanes led to the cliffs that loomed over the sea. There were wind-bent hawthorns, scattered pines, and above all the vivid yellow of gorse. At this time of year the gorse was in vigorous bloom, as if to say 'Just look at me!', great expanses of rough-edged splashes of colour wherever you looked. And beyond the gorse: a mighty band of blueish green — the Atlantic Ocean, less than a hundred metres away. Above it, the crystal blue of the sky. A light that was almost supernatural.

Dupin took another good look at the surrounding area. There was still no one to be seen. Nothing stirred. The car park was a lonely place, that was for sure, completely shut off on the landward side by dense undergrowth several metres high, backed by a small patch of woodland.

Lying in the grass by the car-park, Kadeg had said. Dupin's eyes spontaneously scoured the ground, pointless though it was to do so: he had no idea where the celebrated actress had claimed to have spotted the body. It had clearly been raining here too until very recently, for the tarmac was wet and glinted in the sunlight.

Dupin rang Riwal's number. No response. He tried Kadeg's. Again, no response. There were two steady bars on the signal-strength indicator. Why weren't they answering? Perhaps there was no reception where they were.

Dupin thought for a moment, and then headed for the earthen path that wound its way through the oaks, these becoming ever denser the further he went.

The path led up the hillside and proved unexpectedly steep. Dupin had almost reached the top. The landscape changed abruptly at this point. The oaks, reminiscent of some ancient Celtic fairyland, gave way to gently undulating meadowland dotted with apple trees, and exhibiting dozens of fresh molehills smelling of heavy earth. It was a tranquil, picture book landscape that Bretons call *les terres*: harmonious, peaceful, serene, completely different from the harshness of the cliffs and the violence of the ocean. Such contrasting landscapes in such close proximity.

This hilly plateau lay between the mouths of the Aven and the Belon, both of them mythic rivers, or more properly fjords, that emptied into the same rugged bay, one from the north west, the other from the north east. Slicing their way deep into the land, they shaped the coast between them into a neat triangle — a three-quarter island, as it were; a separate, inviolate realm that could only be entered from the north via the narrow lanes that ran between Pont-Aven and Riec-sur-Bélon.

Here, as lower down, there was no sign of anyone.

Dupin turned round and was soon back in the car park. He'd try one of the lanes leading down towards the sea.

He suddenly caught the sound of voices some way off, and before long he saw a group coming towards him up the lane: his two inspectors, and a policeman and policewoman he didn't know.

'Where's the actress?'

Dupin offered no greeting by word or gesture, and his tone was gruffer than he had intended.

'She insisted on going back to Port Belon, she was freezing cold', Kadege told him gleefully. 'We obviously couldn't force the old lady to stay here until you made it here from your penguins.'

Riwal intervened to preempt any reaction from Dupin, which would certainly have raised the temperature considerably.

'She showed us the spot where she thinks she saw the body, then we took her to *La Coquille*.' His tone of voice was studiously matter-of-fact.

'And the body hasn't turned up anywhere else?'

'No, boss.'

'Show me the place where Sophie Bandol saw it.'

'Follow me, sir.' The young policewoman with a blonde pony tail and sparkling green eyes had unexpectedly taken the lead and veered sharply off to the left.

They carried on to the point where the roughly 25-metre by 15-metre car park began. The impenetrable bank of undergrowth formed a sort of niche just here. The wild, tussocky grass came up to their ankles.

'Just here', said the policewoman, pointing at an area about half a metre from the edge of the tarmac and right up against the bank of undergrowth.

'Madame Bandol thinks the head of the man was at a peculiar angle. And she saw blood. I've marked everything with a length of cord.'

Only now did Dupin notice the nylon cord running parallel to the edge of the tarmac.

'Ah, yes, this is — er — our new colleague. That should really have been left for the crime scene people, but — er — she's still very new to the job', stammered the older policeman. Late fifties, thought Dupin, and on the face of it at least a thoroughly decent sort. 'I'm Erwann Braz. As you know, it's not at all certain that anything has happened here that — er — merits investigation. We've examined the whole area very carefully and found nothing at all. And by the way, Monsieur le Commissaire, let me say what an honour it is to make your acquaintance.'

He had uttered the last sentence in a tone of abject servility that made Dupin cringe. So much for him being a thoroughly decent sort. Dupin couldn't stand arselickers.

'In my opinion', declared Dupin, looking straight at the young policewoman, 'our colleague Magalie Melen' — and her name rang out like pistol shots — 'has done exactly the right thing.'

Magalie Melen didn't look as if she actually needed any support from the commissaire.

'Did Sophie Bandol manage to see see the man's face?'

Again, it was Melen who replied.

‘No, the body was too contorted and she stopped too far away.’

‘And where did she see blood?’

‘She couldn’t say.’

A vehicle could be heard approaching and everyone turned round. It was a flashy off-roader. Dupin recognised it at once: it was René Reglas. His favourite pathologist, oh yes — the Mr. Universe of forensic science. Utterly insufferable. Dupin’s run of luck in not being involved with him for quite some time had clearly now come to an end.

‘Great work, I’m sure!’

‘Madame Bandol arrived over there from the hillside’, continued Melen, unperturbed, and pointed at the path that Dupin had just followed. ‘She said she didn’t spot the body at first, not until her dog suddenly started barking, but she didn’t go any closer than four or five metres. She showed us where she stopped. She said her dog went completely bananas. She was afraid he’d start sniffing at the body and...’ — Melen seemed unsure of herself — ‘perhaps catch an infection of some sort.’

‘An infection?’

‘That’s what she said.’

‘She’s an old lady’, offered Riwal, ‘I expect the whole business made her a bit scared.’

Erwann Braz spoke up in a tone of great impatience. ‘Everyone knows she gets confused sometimes. Disorientated. Early-stage senile dementia, I reckon. Quite apart from the fact that she’s a bit weird and wacky at the best of times.’

‘Who says so?’ Dupin shot back. ‘What an earth are you basing that on?’

‘It’s common knowledge around here. Just in the last couple of years she’s been to the police several times claiming that she’d been robbed. Petty stuff. And never anything that really added up. One time it was a large boulder that was supposed to have disappeared from her drive. She’s very well known to us down at the station.’

Throughout his entire life there had been few expressions that enraged Dupin more than ‘It’s common knowledge’.

‘That boulder really *had* disappeared’, remarked Magalie Melen intrepidly.

‘There you are!’ said Dupin, delighted.

It was Kadeg, surprisingly, who brought the conversation back to the sheer facts.

‘We’ve checked the whole area, Monsieur le Commissaire. Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary.’

‘Really? So the forensics findings are already cut and dried, are they? Sensational! We needn’t have

bothered turning up.’ Reglas had joined the little group from the rear. ‘The police do the crime scene people’s job for them these days, do they? How very peculiar!’

Reglas was accompanied by his team: two spotty youths who both clearly regarded themselves as being just as brilliant and infinitely superior as their boss.

‘I want all vehicles removed from the potential crime scene. By that I mean the entire car park. Each single car here constitutes an infringement of the rules and regulations. You might already have contaminated important evidence.’

Reglas and his sidekicks simultaneously set down their imposing silver cases and opened them. Neither the two officers from Riec nor Dupin and his inspectors paid any attention to the pathologist’s demand.

‘It may well be’, said Riwal, completely unfazed, ‘that there was no body here at all.’

‘We don’t have a shred of evidence’, added the older local officer, ruling himself out of contention yet again.

Kadeg kept up his astonishingly matter-of-fact approach. ‘Our starting point is a statement, not so far disproved, that there was a body lying here. With blood on it. Even though the body is not there now. There may be perfectly good reasons for that — the murderer may simply have got rid of it, for instance.’

‘Show me where this body’s supposed to have been.’ Reglas, too, was good at being unimpressed.

The older officer from Riec gave Dupin a look at once enquiring and obsequious, but Dupin merely shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows.

‘The old lady who reported the body said it was here’, said Braz, pointing to the spot.

‘This area has a special aura’, proffered Riwal all of a sudden: his penchant for the darkly mysterious was well known, and stood in sharp contrast to his markedly practical side. All heads immediately turned in his direction. Dupin was glad that no one asked him what he meant, not even the two officers from Riec.

Moments later Kadeg made himself the centre of attention once again. ‘An informant of mine thinks that within the last few days sand has been stolen from Plage de Trenez and Plage Kerfany-les-Pins. They’re very close to here.’

Oh, great. This was all Dupin needed. Like a man possessed, Kadeg had been going on to Dupin and the entire station for weeks about nothing else but ‘thefts of sand’. Dupin was thoroughly fed up with it, despite Nolwenn’s emphatic insistence that he shouldn’t take the matter too lightly. Thefts of sand had indeed occurred repeatedly, in some places on a major scale. Contrary to the general perception, sand was an exceptionally valuable raw material right across the world and was used in vast quantities for an extremely diverse range of purposes, including concrete, cement, glass, paper and plastics. In particular, the silicon in quartz sand was essential for microchips, computers, mobiles and many other things. Kadeg had churned out reams of facts: two hundred tons of sand were

needed to build one house, and thirty thousand for one kilometre of motorway; on a conservative estimate 70% of all the beaches in the world had already been plundered by the sand industry, illegally in the vast majority of cases. Sand was stolen in huge quantities by criminal gangs and other such organisations. It was a global phenomenon, so Dupin had learned, one that affected Brittany too, and brought catastrophic ecological consequences in its train. An action group, *Le peuple des dunes*, had been formed some years earlier to fight it and harness public opinion in an effort to protect the local beaches. Nolwenn had slapped a long article about it on Dupin's desk: 'La guerre du sable' — 'The sand war'.

It was an important topic, no doubt — but not here, and not at this particular point in time.

'Don't go banging your drum about sand just now, Kadeg! We have other things to worry about.'

'I'm sure you're aware that people had been stealing sand from the remote beaches near Kerouini and Pendruc for more than two years before anyone even noticed. The thieves were caught only by pure chance.'

Kadeg was a real fanatic. He was right, though: cunningly contrived thefts of sand were difficult to detect. The perpetrators drove trucks in the dead of night to out-of-the-way beaches at low tide, and by the following morning the ensuing high tide had obliterated all evidence of their presence. Although masses of sand had been taken, no one noticed, not least because spring tides and storms often carried away gigantic quantities of the stuff, disgorging all or some of it only several days later in many cases, perhaps in a completely different location. This happened many times every year. Dupin was always worried that this fate could befall his own favourite beach, and that one day its sand could be washed away and never come back again. It was incredible the way the sea constantly forged new landscapes: a massive bay could be full of the finest golden sand sloping gently down to the water over a distance of half a kilometre, then a day or so later it could be two or three metres lower, all rock and stone and barely a grain of sand to be seen. That February a storm had ripped so much sand from the Sables Blancs beach at Concarneau that the petrified trunks of an ancient forest of oaks had stood exposed to view for several days, jutting up a good half-metre above the mud like some gigantic art installation.

'So you see a connection between the body that Madame Bandol claims to have seen, the fact that it has now disappeared, and the activities of criminals stealing sand from along this coast?'

Dupin was grateful to the young policewoman for asking such a precise question. But it didn't stop Kadeg.

'It's my opinion that the Kerouini job wasn't done by someone on their own, despite what the building contractor claimed. There's a system behind it. It's highly sophisticated organised crime. A mafia! One of these gangs has just been picked up in Senegal.'

'That all seems extremely vague to me right now', Magalie Melen remarked calmly.

'Everybody wants it. We've got the best sand in the world here in Brittany. Pure granite. They're really keen on that. It's ideal for everything, for...'

'That's enough, Kadeg. We've got the picture.'

'I'd like to emphasise once again', said Erwann Braz in his mulish way, 'that it's still highly questionable whether there is anything at all here that needs investigating.'

'At exactly what time did the old lady say she saw someone lying here?' bellowed Reglas, who was kneeling on the ground a few metres away from them.'

'Just before 5, she said.'

'Typical! It's presumably poured with rain here as well?'

It sounded as if Reglas regarded this as a personal insult. 'In rain like that, organic residues dissolve within minutes. We'll have to take earth samples, and even then we're unlikely to have much luck.'

Dupin felt himself getting more and more agitated.

'I'm going to talk to Madame Bandol myself.'

'But what are we to...'

Kadeg was making difficulties, as always.

'You're to wait here with Riwal and our two colleagues from Riec until Monsieur Reglas has prepared his initial report.'

Already some way off as he said this, Dupin hurried towards his car.

'But we...'

Kadeg just wouldn't stop.

'Later.'

Dupin opened his car door, climbed in, and stepped on the accelerator the moment the engine started, making the Citroën jolt forward.

What a crazy situation this was. There was Kadeg, for one thing, obsessing away about the theft of sand; there was this great film icon of the twentieth century playing a starring role; there was a corpse that had suddenly disappeared, but might never have existed in the first place. Even though, for the time being at least, he didn't consider the magnificent Sophie Bandol to be unreliable just because she was old and apparently a touch eccentric, he was well aware that the elderly really could get confused about things sometimes.

- End of Sample -