



La Bete Returns!

by Derek Brockis

"If all wolves had been as this wolf they would have changed the history of man--" Robert Louis Stevenson

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The final total of La Bete's killings, which took place in the closing years of the Ancien Regime in France, was 25 women, 68 children, and 6 men. She seriously injured well over 30 others. The first officially recorded murder was Jeanne Boulet, aged fourteen, at les Ubas about July 3rd, 1764. The last definite killing was on June 18th, 1767 at Desges, the final victim being an unidentified little girl. La Bete was last witnessed strolling along at Sarlat, a prehistoric cave area just outside Gevaudan, on August 4th, 1767. Then La Bete as La Bete vanishes into the mist of history.

Had she been killed, as was claimed, or had she simply moved on?

Her attacks should not be considered in isolation. Similar killings had taken place nearly a century earlier, at Benais in 1693 --in that particular periods of terrorization over 100 definite killings nearly all women and children, (though the toll was possibly as high as 200) were committed by an animal exactly resembling La Bete. Some forty years after the period we will be studying, fresh attacks began, in Vivarias, between 1809 and 1813, when at least 21 children and adolescents were killed by a similar beast. Another long period of years elapses and we find the savagings in l'Indre from 1875 to 1879. The killings seem to have occurred mostly in four year periods of terrorization. Odd savagings by wolf-like beasts have gone on ever since up until 1954.

Descriptions of La Bete are the same for many sightings and for other beasts recorded in the region of France in the centuries before and after her most famous killing spree. The prints and engravings show her almost universally as a rakish, elegant creature--after all, she was French--often in action on two legs. These stylish atmospheric drawings tend to swamp equally well expressed verbal descriptions, which were of a less elegant, more burly monster remotely derived from a wild boar or dog with a pig or catlike muzzle. A consistent factor is that when pounced on, and while fighting for their lives, victims were conscious of only an unbelievably fast-moving blurred mass of brownish fur, and were unable to give details.

She could flatten herself on the ground almost to invisibility, when she was said to look no bigger than a fox. Her pounce was like that of a cat rather than the rushing up and biting of a dog or a wolf. People did escape by climbing trees, which she was never known to do. She liked attacking in an upright position, a stance used also when wading across shallow streams and prowling round houses at night, although she hardly ever killed during complete darkness, perhaps because her favorite prey--children--was tucked up at home in bed. However, she occasionally enjoyed killing romantically by moonlight.

Her upright stance was, of course, the one favored by criminals and hoaxers attempting an imitation, although no court records of such charges have come to light. Bodies were usually bloodless when found, which is understandable when they were in pieces but not when fresh and almost intact. In two or three cases, bodies are recorded as found frugally buried like a squirrel's nuts. Her preference for human flesh was taken as evidence that La Bete was no wolf, because wolves universally seek livestock and avoid humans. Other evidence often overlooked by careless writers who casually describe her as a very large wolf is that there were virtually no human deaths caused by wolves in that district in the mid eighteenth century (or since, for that matter) except for the odd case of rabies.

Sometimes she supposedly tortured sheep and goats to lure their keepers out of hiding and be attacked. She was also seen forcing animals to play with her. High intelligence was a peculiarity of La Bete but the



taller tales must be assessed for truth against a background of rumor and panic in a superstitious population.

Mysterious early monster sightings and attacks to the south east of the Auvergne were probably La Bete, though poor little Jeanne Boulet was her first official victim. During 1763 and early 1764, attacks had crept

stealthily towards the Auvergne from the Vivarais direction, with sporadic incidents in the Foret de Mercoire, twelve miles north of Mont Lozere. In 1764 the attack rate increased. Jeanne boulet and two others were killed in July, one in August and five in September. Sometimes, however, long periods would pass with no killings at all. Just when the country fold must have begun to think it was all over the killing began again. One thing is certain: La Bete killed for food. She ate from 90% of her victims, and even when disturbed, would take time to tear off an arm or leg from the living or dead body and carry it away.

Rumors spread like driver ants though the scattered villages. Victims usually died terrified, alone and uncomforted out in the he open -- others died days later, at home, in again, with no eyes, no faces, scalps torn-off, or fearfully damaged kidneys--one of her specialties was to bite deeply into the side.

Great detail about the victims is often available, such as the gold cross still round the neck of a girl when her head was eventually found miles away from her body. There is the house at Septsols where the Denty girl was eaten on May 16th, 1767. You can still find la Chaumette farm at which La Bete was reported shot and bleeding. There is the village of Pepinet where she killed two and injured one. Many traceable family graves still hold victims' bodies except for those who were carried away or who simply never came home--'devore par la Bete' is their empty epitaph. Reading such messages chills the blood, even at this great distance in time. You walk the shady tracks, just as she did, but look sharply over your left shoulder if rabbits rustle or waving wings shadow the corner of your eye.

Countless tales of her ill deeds remain. Such as that of the wicked stepmother, Madame Raymond of Lignal, who wanted to get rid of her step-son in order to ensure that her own child inherited the farm. To achieve this, she sent the boy out daily alone to the fountain where La Bete was known to prowl whilst keeping her own son safe in the farm-yard. La Bete did indeed make a visit Guess whom she chose to leave in pieces at the bottom of the nearby ravine.

Then there was the devout woman who, having missed church, knelt to pray in the open air. La Bete answered her prayers by biting out her throat.

Two starving beggar women begged from farm to farm. They walked along a lonely lane, then there was one.

A poor sixty year old lady, Catherine Vally, was killed at Buffeyrettes while peacefully caring for her only possession --a single cow.

There is the case when, a child victim having been snatched from her in a farmyard, she spitefully killed a sheep and a pig before leaving empty-clawed.

A farmer, risen early and peacefully scything wheat in the moonlight just before dawn, saw something rustling towards him through the tall stalks. It was not his friendly old dog come for a fuss, it was La Bete come for his blood. He fought her off with the scythe, managing to escape, but on arriving home become unconscious with terror for two hours.

Further Atrocities:

The milkmaid smoothly de-throated while standing under the protection of guns of the fortified Chateau walls at Le Besset. The case of the boy carried within her jaws over three walls but surviving to build a still well-known house at Grezes.



The girl whose body remained standing upright for some time after La Bete had cleanly slashed off her head; her sister, who had witnessed the incident, took some time to go slowly mad.

For one family, living in winter on stewed wild chestnuts in a hut with no windows, the only luxury was a weekly glass of sour wine. La Bete left their daughter an insane, wounded invalid taking months to die slowly in the cold darkness. This

story has been turned into a famous historical novel, *La Bete du Gevaudan* by Able Chevalley, which infers La Bete was a cross between a dog and hyena bred by a mutilated humans master.

So many sad tales to touch us from the past.

So who was La Bete? Some suggest she was a werewolf. The werewolf legend is worldwide. In Africa and India they prefer wereleopards, werebears and all sorts of queer beasties. Even in Scotland a werewolf tale exists --the Wulver--said to have been seen several times this century in the Shetland Islands. Although a powerful dangerous beasts, like most Scots he is not aggressive to humans unless provoked.

Suspicion that a so called 'meneur des loups' (the persistent legend of a man who runs with and trains wild wolves) might have been responsible for the killings was widespread and represents one, but only one, of the more acceptable explanations.

Trained hyenas have been studied in real life and considered possible Betes. They are said to be more dangerous than wild ones. The Lyacon or Lycaon has been mentioned. This is a mythical beast of the Middle East with hyena/wolf associations named after a king. There is a factual basis to most legends, so it pays not to dismiss them all lightly as nonsense. The similarly named (odd coincidence) Theylacine marsupial wolf of Tasmania alive as recently as 1934 and still occasionally reported, has been considered and dismissed as not up to the job. However, it's larger relative the Thylacoleo, an extinct carnivorous marsupial, would have been a very different matter--but, of course, one of these brown, lion-sized, kangaroo-like daylight predators, with long gaping jaw, mobile tail, upright stance, marks on its stomach and fast enough to outrun hounds, could not possibly have reached and survived in the Auvergne, could it?

Excitingly in 1995 inquiry to Japan immediately produced the one word most exactly describing La Bete, which is 'tigerdog' --a real but extinct beast on record there; no more information so far but perhaps the true answer to the mystery has awaited us in the East all these years. We shall see.

The horrible possibility that La Bete was a crossbreed between human and animals, directly or by some Frankensteinian experiment appears never to have been seriously tabled. Perhaps strict church-men did not like to introduce this distasteful idea to their flocks, they being French, evenings long and candles short. For centuries such creatures have allegedly occurred in remote regions of the world, although biologist always said crossbreeding between beast and human was impossible. That was of course, before modern technology.

Another possible source of human-animal hybrids could have been the perverted experiments of powerful aristocrats, of whom France has produced some of the nastiest and most inventive, such as Billes de Rais (1396-1440)--mass child tortrer--and Marquis de Sade (1740-1814)--more ink than action--who would have been twenty-four when La Bete was busy. We do indeed find that, as with all good murder mysteries, there is a sadistic aristocrat explanation. In this case he was supposed to have hidden among the ample shady skirts of the nuns of the thirteenth century Cistercian abbey of Mercoire, in the region where La Bete

commenced her proven attacks. The abbey is still there but now a farm. The wicked aristocrat suggestion is ridiculed by all serious students but perhaps he existed all the same.

Hybrids are always recorded as pitiful, degenerate specimens, certainly never fast and wickedly clever. It seems just as much a rule of nature that monstrosities are unsuited for survival as that misfits must become monsters to survive. Give her credit for being a thoroughbred elegant serial killer, a little naughty at times but of respectable parentage. La Bete does not deserve a dubious reputation.

One of the more acceptable solutions to the mystery is that the lady resulted from a one in a billion gene mutation in which a brain of almost human intelligence developed in a body with animal strength and vitality. Shadows of mutant ideas exist in old writings but are vague because genetic science simply did not exist in those days.

There are many suggestions as to the true identity of La Bete, but no one simple answer.

While she prowled, inhabitants of farms and villages suffered seriously from lack of sleep; every noise at night raised households in panic, so tense were their nerves. When woken-up they were too terrified to drag away the clumsy wooden shutters and look out, because those who did often found themselves staring straight into La Bete's eyes. With no glass between them and her, and her long claws on the windowsill. They were lucky, that, unlike Hack the Ripper and The Vampire of Dusseldorf, she never entered houses.

By day their ears strained for the ringing of church bells summoning them to another murder scene, which might be their own wife or child left lying dead and bloodless between home, flock and school. Or worse still, all that might remain was the empty space in their lives left by some loved one carried off for slow dismemberment, never to be seen again, whose sufferings before death were too terrible to dwell upon.

Yet she was not always successful. She was much weaker than a tiger or a large bear against which a lightly armed human stands no chance. Elusive but vulnerable, she could be driven off by dogs and simple weapons such as stones, spears and laundry boards. It is hard to equate the apparent ease with which she was chased away with her boldness on other occasions. Hoaxes and mistaken identities probably gave rise to the tall tales, whereas the real killings and expert escapes were unobtrusive. The fictitious Bete rampaged while the genuine one cautiously killed 99 --and, of course, many who saw her told no tales. She killed most successfully through sheer speed and surprise, not boldness.

Unpredictably cowardly or audacious, she would either cringe and slink away, even from children, or show great courage, for example by attacks on two armed and mounted couriers, and on a group of three people cutting trees with axes. Another time she scalped a boy by the village fountain at Cayres but then suffered the humiliation of being driven off by women hitting at her with laundry boards. Fires lit on the pastures for protection did not repel her; she still killed those huddling round them. She even killed a plump forty-five old shepherdess and partially devoured her within a ring of beaters, who were carrying at a 'battue', striking bushes with spears and sticks to drive out La Bete, in the same way grouse are driven from heather on Scottish moors. The shepherdess had been off-guard, thinking herself safe within the circle. When the beaters closed in, they found her body, still heavy even without head and breasts, dragged a considerable distance through thick bushes. Another time she killed within two hours of being chased by hounds, and once smoothly de-throated a servant at her hunters' own lodgings whilst they were out searching for her.

Her sense of humour was satanic. She enjoyed paralyzing strong men with terror by pouncing, playfully throwing them to the ground, and then leaving without using her teeth or claws on them. Perhaps it was just to show she could eat them if she wanted to, although she really preferred the softer female or child flesh.

She even appeared ghoulishly near the funeral of one victim and made mocking noises from just beyond reach. On this occasion she was chased off by dogs, mostly equipped with spiked steel anti-wolf collars; those that did return had teeth marks on their collars as well as wounds on their bodies.

Another strange thing was the clothing occasionally being removed from victims without being badly torn, in some cases roughly rearranged on top of dead bodies. Once a hat was found still on the head of the victim, who was in a sitting position. This removal or rearrangement, although rare, is always quoted as the main evidence for a human beast but there are other possible explanations. More frequently, however, clothing

was torn to shreds. On the other hand Marie-Jeanne Barbier, aged twelve, was found completely naked. Her corpse is described in great detail, even down to the design of claw marks grooving her stomach.

One strange thing, La Bete is often reported as having six claws. We could accept four toes, wolf like, or five fingers, from human or reptile evolution, but what beast claims the mark of six except Satan?

The church however, did not see her as being a tool of the Devil but instead the servant of an avenging God -- she was even called the 'Flail of God'. A massive religious procession was organized between three important local churches--still to be seen-- supported by prayers of nuns and monks both in church and in secluded meditation. Various pilgrimages took place. The Holy Sacrament was displayed in the cathedral at Mende, done only at times of great civil danger or catastrophe. Gavriel Florent -- Bishop of Mende -- accepted her as a real, single, superhuman beast of type unknown in the region and a punishment by God on the Gevaudanais. The Bible references he quotes are shiveringly relevant and create the terrifying presence of La Bete, almost as if the Old Testament was written for this very purpose. Official church acceptance justified the uncomfortable argument, accepted by many divines, that as she came from God there was no point in trying to kill her and she must be endured until forgiveness came. This concept demoralized many simple people. They prayed, imploring her to stop, but naturally she just carried on.



The mysteries about her are endless --her appearance --the occasional amazing escapes of her intended victims. A boy was attacked and bowled over, but falling his short spear remained upright and stuck in La Bete's stomach, saving his life, although he was nearly killed by the stones his companions were frantically throwing at her. You can still see the place where it happened. There is the famous incident when Marie-Jeanne Valet, known as La Pucelle, valiantly drove off La Bete with a home-made spear, its point made from a spindle -- not one would think, a very effective weapon.

The Story as told by Abel Chevalley:

The heroine this time was Marie-Jeanne Valet, twenty years old, servant of the curate of Paulhac. On August 11th she was going from Paulhac to the tithed farm of Broussoux. The road crosses two little river bridges at which point the river forms an islet covered with trees. It was there that La Bete jumped on Marie-Jeanne. The young woman, armed with a home-made-spear, at first recoiled by four or five paces. As La Bete reared up to seize her Marie-Jeanne delivered a blow with her spear into the center of its chest. La Bete issued a piercing shriek and put her paw on the chest wound, threw herself into the water, rolled over several times then disappeared into the undergrowth. Therese, sixteen year old sister of Marie-Jeanne, was present and confirmed this story. It was then between 11 and 12 am. At the time there were three beats going on, directed by Antoine, count of Tournon and brother of M de Lafont. Alerted, they quickly arrived on the scene and saw the spear point still covered with blood along three or four inches of its length. They made a *proces-verbel* -- an official record of the incident.

The followed by another spindle incident when a twelve year old girl was dragged into the bushes. Her older brother, seeing the thread trailed from he spindle on which the girl had been working, followed it and rescued her.

Compensation was sometimes paid to injured victims but this was done only after searching inquiry. There is record of fraudulent claimants being fined and even imprisoned, as a certain Monsieur Geraud (or Gerard) found to his cost.

In October 1764 the local governor issued an order that women and children must never work alone in the fields.

The king -- Louis XV -- sent expert hunters, including later his own personal gun bearer, Antione de Beauterne, who selected fourteen crack marksmen as assistants. A Captain Duhamel, commanded two companies of dragoons, installed himself at Langogne as early as August 1764, and later at St-Chely-d'Apcher. His troops were even equipped with the latest morar bombs -- the 'smart' weapons of the time -- to fire into woods to flush out La Bete. She didn't flush. The King demanded she be killed and exhibited in the royal garden. A wooden statue was made ready for covering with her skin when she was as caught but the model remained undraped.

The dragoons were good at polishing uniforms but failures at La Bete catching. Apart from teasing pursuers by keeping just beyond reach, she even led dragoons on horseback into dangerous bogs, while herself swerving to one side at the last moment. The dragons became the laughing stock of professional hunters. Some were finally ordered to dress as women and act as shepherdesses, as bait to attract her. She was not fooled. However, when the professional hunters had their chances, they did no better.

On February 7th, 1765, and other occasion, Captain Duhamel recruited whole local populations, taking everyone who could carry a weapon, in an attempt to flush out La Bete. It is alleged that, on one occasion, on hundred perished provided more than 20,000 people to act as beaters and search the valleys and mountains where she had been reported. Such numbers are widely reported. Such numbers are widely recorded but probably exaggerated, being that beyond what local sparse populations could reasonably have provided. It is not clear why there was this apparent exaggeration. Perhaps it was to impress the beastly and impatient Louis XV that everything possible was being done.

In spite of the peasants' hate for La Bete, these enforced duties were greatly disliked, because they damaged crops and demanded the neglect of the farm work which was essential to poor hungry people, costing them desperately needed wages. Often beaters collapses from undernourishment. It was said that times were so hard, especially during the 1765 famine, that they preferred La Bete to take a few children (of whom they had too many) rather than lose the gravest and with it risked the death by starvation of the rest of the family. Things turned nasty;; four beaters were sent to prison for deserting the beat to go to a bistro in St Chely, and a local official was imprisoned for lack of cooperation with Captain Duhamel, now very unpopular. The official was disciplined by the dreaded, 'lettre de cachet' from Versailles, under which he could have vanished into the Bastille forever --yet more evidence of the pressure originating from the King. In defense of his majesty's apparent overreaction, it must be stressed he was genuinely concerned that discontent caused by the continued presence of La Bete could ignite revolution at any moment.

At one time, three large independent bodies of troops and hunters were ranging the landscape plus the hunting packs supplied free by local nobles, including Marquis Jean-Joseph d'Apcher. He was a handsome and debonair French aristocrat, renowned for his hunting skills, and he methodically sought La Bete every Sunday morning, although hunting on the Sabbath was usually forbidden by the church. Some of the aristocracy became so popular supporting peasants that their lives and families were spared at the time of The Revolution. Jean-Joseph d'Apcher and his family were imprisoned, ready for execution, but the local population demonstrated so violently they were all released. He died in Spain years later.

One sophisticated commander organized small ambushes, consisting of pairs of soldiers hidden at vantage points all over the countryside. However, rather peculiarly he maintained them only at night, when she usually killed in the daytime.

There are records of huntsmen, even soldiers, freezing with terror upon meeting La Bete and not firing when they were close and almost certain of hitting her; they claimed their weapons failed from supernatural interference and she vanished before their eyes. 'Quelle histoire!' (a likely story) as their mustached old dragoon sergeant, whose grandsons were on day to fall bravely for Napoleon, no doubt growled.

She was reported shot and wounded on about ten occasions. The descriptions of locations and ranges have recently been studied by an English armaments engineer, using sophisticated information on the weapon available at the time. The information on the weapons of death is always lovingly detailed. There does seem to have been a degree of optimism but the marksmen. It was claimed that La Bete was often hit, at 50 to 70 yards range in rough country. This seems unlikely given the weapons involved. Volleys of musket ball would statistically have been a different matter but most of the claims of hits were by important individuals, wanting only to do their duty and not, of course interested in rewards or share options. The records show that La Bete twice returned to her depredations within a day of being reported shot and bleeding, which is unlikely unless he's really was supernatural or more than one beast was roaming the countryside. The Betes reported wounded were probably only local wolves, boars and foxes in the wrong place, who then made their seascape, leaving a trail of blood behind them.

A famous tale was when the vicar and almost the entire population of Prunieres swam and waded across the river Truyere in freezing dead-of-winter conditions, in pursuit of her. As so often she was seen and not caught. The attack and sighting were well away from where the refrigerated villagers impetuously crossed the river -- they had all rushed off in the wrong direction.

Poor Duhamel, he never had nay luck either -- his frogs remained frogs -- no princesses and no Bete. Once, in close pursuit on horseback Wild West style, they all came to a fork in the trail. Duhamel and partners galloped this away to the left, while his nearby troops saw her escaping to the right.

On April 6th, 1765 he was replaced by Grand-louvetier Denneval who during the month succeeded in killing the Wolf of Panouse, in Lorcieres, now part of Cantal, found to have human bones in its stomach. This small she-wolf was stuffed and mounted when dead but it was later accepted she could not possibly have been La Bete, not being strong enough for the job and that she had only been scavenging from corpses left by the real wicked lady.

Denneval was in turn replaced by Antoine de Beauterne, head of the royal hunt, who is alleged to have cheated by shooting a large wolf, the 'Loup de Chazes', released near him after it had been caught in a leg trap (its leg was later found to be broken). To this day there are two schools of thought about Antoine. One says he cheated, the other says he was an honest man who genuinely believed he had killed La Bete. The courts always maintained his animal was her and the king made him a very rich man -- La Bete took her place in his coat-of-arms which can still be seen to this day. ((webmistress' note, have been searching without luck for Beauterne's coat of arms, will post it when I find it.))

The dead wolf was carried to the chateau of Besset. La Pucelle de Paulhac went to inspect the body but refused to identify it as resembling the animal she had fought. Because of her popularity the nobles dare not put as much pressure on her for a positive identification as they did on the other witnesses. A girl brave enough to have won a fight with La Bete, with only a spindle to protect herself, was not going to be intimidated by decadent nobles for whom the tip of a tall wooden shadow was marking the days on the gilded sundials.

The deaths, moreover, continued. In fact, after the killing of the Loup de Chazes in September 1765, the killings went on for almost another two years. Yet because the king, who was all powerful and a semi-deity had declared her dead, she was regarded officially so, even though it was tacitly accepted that the problems still existed. The concept that there might have been more than one Bete, was surprisingly, never adopted as an excuse. Antoine himself faded from the scene to enjoy his fortune, coat of arms and Order of St Louis.

The new two year killing cycle commenced on December 21st, 1765. Christmas was remembered as a particularly melancholy time, because meticulous priests refused to authorize burial rites on the grounds of insufficient remains; a little girl vanished in Julianges and only two hands and two feet were ever found.

On June 17th-20th, 1767 at a beat of mount Mouchet organized and paid for by the feather-hatted and persistent Marquis Jean-Joseph d'Apcher, a deformed wolf believed by some to be La Bete was shot. There were allegations that the killing was staged, another wolf being killed at the place and time, and the deformed one later substituted as being an altogether more sinister specimen. It weighed one hundred and nine livres (livres being a variable weight unit of about one pound in those days) --big wolves weigh over one hundred and thirty pounds. A Jean chastel was its killer but his wolf was never officially accepted as La Bete.

Chastel had supposedly been sitting in a clearing reading a book of litanies to the Holy Virgin, when he fired off a silver bullet at the deformed wolf. The silver bullet was one of three made from a deal of the Virgin. (Another story tells us that the lethal bullet was in fact made from a lead medal which had been blessed.)

Here is Henri Pourrat's account of the death of Chatel's wolf;

[The Marquis d'Apcher] set up his forces on high ground.. Investing a wide area of territory to the left and to the right. He had placed everyone as advantageously as possible and La Bete, without being able to escape, must have been pushed back onto the hunters.

...Jean Chastel was waiting for her on the Snage d'Auvert. He was reading in his prayer book the litanies of the Holly Virgin. He saw her coming. He quickly recognized that it was La Bete, but out of respect for the Catholic church he wished to finish his prayers. Then he shut the book, put it in his pocket, folded spectacles and took up his gun. One knee on the ground he raised the gun to his shoulder, aimed and fired. La Bete was shot down.

"Bete, you will not eat any more' he was said to have cried out. Some people said she made several jumps forward and backwards, others that she did not move. All of a sudden the hounds of M. d'Apcher arrived surrounded her and put her to death.

...La Bete had come straight up to Jean Chastel...There is something strange in this story. Jean Chastel took his time and La Bete waited for him.

The sinister inference is that La bete knew Jean Chastel, ran up to him and stood meekly waiting while he shot her.

The site of Chastel's old house in Darnes is still identifiable, as are his place of marriage and the family graves at Besseyre, but documentation is limited and does not established lish anything other than probable death in mid June of 1767 of a deformed wolf, with jaws and marking resembling those attributed to La Bete. Physiological drawings of jaw and teeth were published and are still to be seen.

Although there were no more beast like killings in Gevaudan region for many years -- in fact until 1809 -- it is wrong to attribute this solely to the death of the relatively inoffensive animal about which so much confusion and controversy still exist. Chatel's wolf must remain as one but only one of the possible answers to the puzzle of La Bete, but it was almost certainly a contrived solution and not the whole story.

In spite of the masses and masses of evidence, some contend that there was no Bete. She is not the only case in human history where a few choose to deny events. The Gevaudanais cling to her memory, and perhaps magnify her because she represents the survival of a tough resourceful individual, with a sense of humor, against oppressive bureaucratic authority. They see themselves in her, and she has become a cherished symbol of the region. Her spirit still stalks their quiet countryside. Bonne Chance, Bete.

A note on Sources

The fascination of La Bete does not diminish with time. Works on her flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries -- poems, novels and even a melodrama, published in 1809. Some books dwell boringly in great detail on 99 individual murderers --times, places, injuries, relatives, etc, like a government inquiry -- bland facts evading analysis of the mystery itself. The most famous manuscript is by Magne de Merolles, which finished up in the National Library, Paris. He was the greatest French expert of the 18th century on arms and hunting, and is still widely quoted.

By far the greatest book on La Bete is by Abbe Pourcher in 1889. An outstanding factual modern one is by Felix Beffiere, published in Toulouse in 1994. There are others by Abel Chevalley, Menatory and Henri Pourrat, all in very different styles, all good and available only in French.

