

The Auvergne Ogre

by Derek Brockis

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Jack the Ripper and Nessie are well-known mysteries but the French have kept a real monster up their sleeves for 230 years. Back in the 18th century 'la Bete du Gevaudan' prowled the southern Auvergne and tore people to pieces! This ogre made the Hound of the Baskervilles look like a toy poodle--but there is one big difference, la Bete is hard fact, not fiction or legend.

Because 'Bete' is a feminine noun in French, the beast is always referred to as 'she', and not as 'it'. The resulting impression that so much slaughter was carried out by a female made her all the more sinister and terrifying.

Over a three year period she killed 15 women, 68 children and 6 men, wounding many more. Names, dates, places and injuries are detailed for nearly all the victims, and you can follow tour routes to the farms or valleys where they died, and to the churches where they are buried.

Look up 'Gevaudan' in a French encyclopedia and you will find that the name, now obsolete, refers to a province in Lozere -the area where la Bete began her attacks. It all started on July 3rd 1764, when a young girl was killed. At first incidents were sporadic, and were

in the forest de Mercoine 12 miles north of Mont Lozere. Gradually the attacks moved north then exploded in the wild and desolate countryside of the southern Auvergne. La Bete was most active in and around the triangle formed by the towns of St-Flour, St-Chely-d'Apcher and Saugues. It's hard to comprehend the isolation and harshness of life in this remote district more than two centuries ago. People and their lives were so different from today. There were, of course, no communications except on horseback or foot; illiteracy and abject poverty abounded-many people were reduced to living off wild chestnuts in winter.

Nevertheless, clear witnessed accounts of attacks and deaths by intelligent people increased in number, and were reported and noted in court. L'abbe Pourcher wrote more than a thousand pages, and les abbess Fabre, Pic and Trocellier all recorded facts about la Bete. The Bishop of Mende issued a lengthy mandate in December of 1764 ordering special masses against la Bete throughout his diocese on three successive Sundays; it didn't help. He declared la Bete a punishment from God on the Gevaudanais which only served to heighten fear and further publicize the phenomenon. During the time many plans were put into action, including laying

and digging traps. People saw la Bete near the traps but she was too smart to be caught. Poison was spread over whole mountainsides and in fact attacks did taper off at the height of the poisoning program.

Another of the ways to combat the beast was to organize battues, or beats, in the brush. The participants from nearby parishes would come, armed with staves and pikes. Their activities are on record even down to the cost of the bullets issued to those few who had guns. They would beat the vegetation in the same way grouse hunters have their prey chased from the heather. Many wolves were dispatched in this way. Early in la Bete's reign of terror the army was called in. Captain Duhamel, who commanded two companies of dragoons, installed himself and his men at Langogne in August 1764 and then at St-Chely-d'Apcher. His men were billeted in the peasants' homes, and were paid for by the Gevaudan administration. The troops were not popular because of the expense and because of their arrogance and refusal to help gather in the harvest. To make matters worse they did not catch the beast, so on April 6th 1765, Duhamel and his troops left St-Chely-d'Apcher to be replaced by Louis XV's wolf hunting specialist *le Grand-louvetier*

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Denneval. He organized battues of 10,000 men, and on one occasion they saw the besat, but she managed to evade them.

The king was angry at Denneval for this failure and sent another replacement-Antoine de Beauterne, head of the royal hunt-with some of the best shots in the kingdom. Eventually he presented the court with a huge carnivores beast and was feted as the killer of 'la bete du Gevaudan'. But back in the Auvergne the carnage continued.

By 1766 the alarm was so great that children were armed with homemade spears and walked to school in groups for protection. Some were attacked and killed; some fought the beast off. One 12-year-old, Jacques Portefaix, who protected six other children, was rewarded for bravery and educated to be an officer in the French army. A woman who put up a brave fight on another occasion using a small spear received a cash compensation from the king; she was terribly injured.

The distances over which the beast could travel quickly were amazing;

killings here one day and up to 40 miles away the next. This and other evidence-including sightings of a mother and baby bete-led to the idea that there might be more than one but the matter was never proved either way. Witnesses described la Bete as wolf-like but not a wolf; bigger and with a striped

or ridged back, supple furry tail, claws and long gaping jaw. She killed for food, partially devouring the victims unless disturbed, often killing by crushing heads and eating the entrails at leisure. Baboons, leopards, bears and even wolverines down from the north were, over the years, put forward as possible explanations. Wolverines cover long distances and do drop down from trees and crush skulls from behind, but the objections to the wolverine as a candidate include its avoidance of man and relative lowness.

Other suggestions were supernatural beings such as werewolves, in French loup-garou, a concept to be expected in a continental country district 230 years ago. One of the few mentions of la Bete in the English language describes her as 'The Werewolf of Gevaudan'.

Occasionally she was alleged to have been seen in the company of a man, at other times prowling round lonely farms

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at night and speaking with a semi-human voice.

There was even a suggestion that dressed-up sadists took advantage of a spate of attacks by rabid wolves to impersonate them and assault women and children. Indeed, some attacks were alleged to be by a beast with button-like marks down its stomach. Perhaps the buttons were nipples. In any case, the human explanations was not widely accepted, one argument against being that no man could have out-run the packs of hounds that pursued la Bete on many occasions.

Strange feature is that heads were sometimes completely torn-off during attacks.

According to records, there is no doubt that la Bete preferred human flesh to sheep or goats, which she was rarely seen to kill; animal carcasses were left uneaten while she went in search of human prey. This led opinion away from the theory that la bete anthropophage, or bette feroce (sic), as she was sometimes referred to, was a wolf, as wolves attacked sheep and stayed well away from humans.

La Bete was a peculiar in that she struck almost always during the daytime, rarely at night. She was wary of cattle and pigs, these sometimes chased her away.

The accounts of the beast are, of course, unreliable. . .Someone who saw her embellished on the description, and some who didn't see her at all made up their own accounts. Though some descriptions are grains of truth planted in a field of fantasy, there are some constants: the size of the head and the jaws; the colour of the pelt; its speed and agility. At dawn on June 17th 1766, during a battue on Mont Mouchet, organized by the marquis d'Apcher, a local peasant named Jean Chastel, waited for the



beast, reading a book of litanies to the Holy Virgin.

All of a sudden the monster appeared and Chastel shot it dead. It was a wolf.

This time there were no more deaths. . .But the royal court, convinced of the success of Antoine de Beauverne, refused to recognize Cheastel's feat. Works on the beast flourished in the 18th and 19th century: poems, novels. . .There was even a melodrama on the affair, published in 1809. In more modern times even comic strip albums have been devoted to the subject, and there have been four new reference works published in the last ten years alone. Some of these books on the subject are now rare, sold a prix d'or: quite literally worth their weight in gold.

Postcards, games and car stickers based on la Bete du Gevaudan are sold in town like Mende; there is even a modern statue attributed to her in Marvejols. Extensive public archives are kept in several cities including Cerlmont-Ferrand and Montpellier, and are often used by writers and students to continue research into one of the most intriguing mysteries in French history.

DEREK BROCKIS