

A Thousand Days of Terror The Beast of Gévaudan

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Dozens of contradictory essays and novels – mostly in French – have dealt with this mysterious case. Awful massacres committed by an elusive monster of which the real identity is still not known. From about 1764 to 1767, the Beast (but was it really an animal?) killed between 60 and 100 people, woman and children mostly, in the former diocese of Gévaudan. Based on letters, testimonies and official records, it is possible to make a reconstruction of this most unlikely but nevertheless true story...

We're in 1764. The days of the *Ancien Régime* are coming to an end under the poor reign of Louis XV. Economical and financial problems are causing major discontent among the peasants and other ordinary people. Little do they know about the enlightened intellectuals in France who are pushing the country into a revolution.



Anyway, these hardworking peasants and shepherds, already tormented by disastrous weather conditions, will have other problems to handle in the coming three years in this pre-revolutionary Gévaudan (covering modern day Lozère and Haute-Loire departments).

In June of this ill-fated year, gruesome rumours are spreading in Gévaudan: a young girl has been devoured by a lupine animal, while herding cows. Jeanne Boulet, 14 years old, was attacked in the region between Mende and Langogne, about 50 km south-east of the Margeride Mountains. In those times, it was not unusual that in these forested areas of France packs of wolves caused trouble, especially during the winter. But here, something else is at stake. The victim's body has been torn apart, the head separated from the body. No trace of the mad killer.

In August two new young victims are reported. It must have been the same perpetrator; the bodies show the same traces of outrageousness. But this time there are witnesses. They have seen a wolf-like creature, but with protruding fangs in a long mouth, enormous claws, a long and heavy tail and a black stripe on the back.

The lords of Gévaudan, Vivarais and Auvergne, alarmed by these rumours organize a couple of wolf hunts. Farmers and village people are recruited. A couple of robust animals are killed. The inhabitants of Gévaudan heave a sigh of relief; they think the nightmare is over.



CAPTAIN DUHAMEL

In September the Beast kills five more people. From now on, its name is written with a capital B. More to the north, the heavily mutilated bodies of a thirteen-year old girl and of an adult woman are discovered.

In October, the target is a fifteen-year old boy; who manages to escape, albeit with heavily injured legs. A few days later, three children are confronted with the Beast. The eldest, a fearless thirteen-year old lad pulls a knife and chases the monster.

Emotions rise high now. According to some, the creature would be as big as a calf; others are talking no longer about the Beast but about the Beasts, plural. Moreover, the monster would have human characteristics. Would it be a werewolf? Or the Devil in person?

Even the protestant Huguenots, lately persecuted by the King's troops, are accused of the bloodshedding. Or do the English, eternal enemies of France, have something to do with all this? Finally, the beast seems to have an outspoken preference for the 'weaker' sex, another subject for extravagant speculations.



At the end of September, an entire detachment of the French army organizes a search: 57 dragoons directed by Captain Duhamel are going to look into the matter. But all over a sudden, the Beast seems to have retreated in Auvergne; or anyway it has been spotted there.

The horrible murders have become known all over France by

now. The *Gazette de France*, official Court Newspaper, is covering the facts to the smallest detail. A reward of 6000 *livres* is promised for the person who catches the Beast.

November 25th: The monster returns to Gévaudan. His next victim is a sixty-five year old farmer's wife of Aumont. Her head is discovered, separated from the rest of her body; the beginning of a long series of similar mutilations. The dragoons accept the challenge. On December 23rd they are very close to capturing the diabolical Beast, but it manages to escape at the very last minute.

One disposes of a more accurate description of the creature now: as tall as the tallest dog breed, heavily furred, an enormous head with two impressive fangs, short straight ears and a long, thick tail. Could it be the hybrid of a dog and a hyena?

In December no less than six boys and girls are killed. January is even worse: eleven victims. And still, there are no results for Duhamel's campaigns of February 7th and 11th. The desperate captain now tries a cunning idea: he leaves the bodies where they are found, hoping that the Beast will return to the scene of the crime. Hopeless! But what if one of the dragoons would dress himself in women's clothes and accompany the little cow-herds? The idea was good, but the beast would not be so easily misled.

A NORMAN WOLF HUNTER

On February 18th, the *Gazette de France* reports on the heroic acts of a group of young children: five boys and two girls were attacked by the Beast on January 12th, while they were herding cows near the village of Villaret. The monster had driven its teeth into the arm of the youngest of the lot and tried to drag the boy away. But the twelve year old Jacques Portefaix and his friends set off in pursuit and managed to free their companion by beating the head of the monster with their poles. A farmer alarmed by the noise came to their help, but by then Portefaix had already chased the Beast.



The king was impressed by Portefaix's courageous behaviour and awarded him with a (military) education.

Meanwhile, complaints (some justified, some not) pour in about the dragoons: they seem to be showing more interest in the humble possessions of the local farmers than in the Beast! Even Duhamel is said to have pestered them at one point. Anyhow, the lack of effort by the terrorized populations is getting seriously on Duhamel's nerves. De Saint-Florent, minister of State, calls on specialized Norman wolf-hunters to give Duhamel a hand. The *Gazette de France* brings the chilling report of a mother of three children: attacked by the Beast, she came to the rescue of her children by jumping on its back. One of the children was seriously wounded, but with superhuman effort the mother forced the monster to flee.

It is the beginning of big hunt-downs – some with more than ten thousand men – under the direction of nobleman d'Enneval, a famous wolf-hunter from the North. D'Enneval and his son are summoned to Gévaudan through a personal recommendation by the king. The premium promised for capturing the Beast has increased to 9400 pounds and the rivalry amongst the hunters is also rising. The arrogant d'Enneval refuses to collaborate with Duhamel and even incites the authorities to withdraw the dragoons.

D'Enneval will chase the Beast till the end of July. In vain. Hunt-downs, traps, subterfuge, none of his tactics seem to work. D'Enneval is totally bewildered; his reputation is torn to pieces. He cannot cope with the amazing mobility and apparent invulnerability of the Beast. Had the monster not been hit five times by bullets so far and yet managed to escape each time? And how was it possible that the Beast taken by surprise could disappear like lightning, carrying its victim weighing more than 60 pound in its mouth?

D'Enneval will state emphatically that this is not the work of a wolf, but of something completely different. Or is he merely inspired by his offended pride?

ANTOINE'S HOAX

May 1765: ten deceased victims. June: another seven unfortunates torn to pieces. The king is visibly embarrassed by the situation. At despair, he decides to send his royal huntsmen to Gévaudan, to assist d'Enneval. Number One is François Antoine de Beauterne, Chief Gamekeeper. D'Enneval and Antoine decide to go each their own way, but then Antoine informs the King that d'Enneval is only getting in his way. Exit the unfortunate Norman wolf hunter.

But... yes, Beauterne will soon lose his good reputation as well: three months after his arrival he has not even killed one wolf! True, Gévaudan is an impenetrable, mountainous region, full of deep ravines, treacherous crevices and marshes. Moreover, that dreadful summer of 1765 it is raining continuously and extremely foggy all the time. Crossing this region is a real torture, even for experienced hunters from the North. Winter will soon be coming and with it, all its feared deprivation.

Antoine is complaining about the incredibly harsh weather situation he and his company have to face. His mission risks to end up into a failure; excuses are piling up. After another killing of three persons, the villagers are once more recruited for a chase. They are very reluctant and are getting tired of these neat gentlemen from the North. Even Antoine's own hunting assistants have abandoned all hope.

The *marechaussee* of Haute-Auvergne is summoned to force the reluctant peasants. When on September 13th the cruelly disfigured body of the Denty girl is found in Pépinet, the farmers are furious.

In despair, de Beauterne is forced into a dishonourable action. "The Beast cannot be anything else than a wolf" he writes to the local authority. So, he must have thought, they will have their wolf. On September 22nd a rumor is spreading: the Beast of Gévaudan has been shot in the *Bois des Dames*, nearby St. Julien-des-Chazes, by de Beauterne in person!

The *Gazette de France* reports in much detail on the heroic achievement of the Chief Gamekeeper, as reported by him in the records. On September 21st, de Beauterne, with the help of Squire Rinchard, royal Gamekeeper, has slain the Beast in the *Bois des Chazes*, some twenty kilometers north of its familiar territory.



But suspicions are strong that the news' only purpose is to calm down the emotions. To further glorify Antoine. In the *Bois des Chazes* a pack of wolves has been spotted recently, but never a Monster devouring young children.

Nevertheless, the 'Beast' is presented at the Royal Court. It is a stuffed and fiddled wolf. Antoine is paid the premium and is even allowed to represent the Beast on his coat of arms.

History will never unambiguously demonstrate Antoine's good faith.

SILVER BULLETS

On December 2nd the Beast strikes again: two new victims. During the year 1766 at least another nine poor beggars will be lacerated. Disfigured, decapitated, sometimes only loose hands or feet can be recovered. On July 21st of the same year, a remarkable animal is shot in the vicinity of Pinols. According to its description in the local archives, historians now think it was a baboon. How did a baboon get in the woods of Gévaudan? But admittedly, a baboon is surely a fierce and dangerous animal. So was it the Beast? No! Until June 1767 another 16 victims will be torn to pieces.

The *Gazette de France* refuses to publish another word on the subject. Remain the isolated reports on an increasing plague of wolves in the countryside...



In Gévaudan, things take on psychotic proportions. Increasing testimonies on the behaviour, unheard knowledge of the terrain, strategy and foresight of the Beast, point undeniably to a human intelligence. This cannot be the work of a wolf or another animal. Is it perhaps a werewolf?

On June 19th 1767, a big chase is organized in the woods of Ténazyre by the Marquis of Apcher. During this chase, another enormous wolf-like animal is struck down. Jean Chastel, son of a famous wolf-breeder, has shot down the animal with a couple of silver bullets. These bullets had been cast from melted medals of the Holy Virgin Maria...

It is a fact that as of June 1767 the horri-

ble butchery in Gévaudan comes to an end.

Did Chastel really eliminate the Beast? Anyway, the question of its mysterious identity remains unsolved until today. Who or what was the Beast in reality?

THE HYPOTHESES

In his standard book *Vie et Mort de la Bête du Gévaudan* (1988) expert R.F. Dubois, gives a very comprehensive overview of the various hypotheses, dealing with the identity of our voracious protagonist. Speculations that divide the authors into two groups that up until today are fiercely debating with each other.

On the one hand, the historical-rational school with historian Guy Crouzet as contemporary flag-bearer, on the other hand the ethological-empirical school guided by wolf expert Gérard Menatory.

The two schools defend hypotheses completely opposite to one another: 'The beast has to be a wolf' and 'The beast cannot possibly be a wolf'.

Crouzet bases his conviction that only a wolf can be guilty of the 'bestial' murders, on the historical analyses by three clergymen: abbé Pierre Pourcher (1889), abbé Francois Fabre (1901) and abbé Xavier Pic (1968).

It's a matter of common sense, according to Crouzet. There were enough wolves in France in the said period. Moreover, letters, reports and testimonies from that time very often point to a wolf as the culprit.

Undignified, Gérard Menatory (who died in 1984) refused to accept these conclusions. Menatory was a renowned wolf specialist; on his 4 acres big domain in Lozère he had brought together a hurdle of 40 wolves, from all over Europe. He was thoroughly acquainted with the wolves; no one had to tell him how a wolf would behave.

With the observations of the famous ethnologist Konrad Lorenz in mind, many researchers lately made new discoveries in the field. Menatory compared these scientific results with his own findings. In two publications, he argued that the behaviour of the Beast does not in the least correspond to the behaviour of a wolf. In historical texts, the Beast was never unambiguously described according to Menatory. One person saw this, another saw that.

Moreover, the wolf is a shy animal that only seldom eats human flesh. It is certainly not a furious mass killer like the Beast. However, the animal might have been a hyena, concluded Menatory. Possibly and even more dreadful, a *trained* hyena...

KILLER DOG

In 1979, the French author J.J. Barloy had the bright idea to feed all the data on the Beast into a computer. Results of this computer analysis also argued against the wolf hypothesis:

1-A wolf rarely attacks humans and even if it does, will never behead its victim

2-There was a well thought-out system by which the Beast operated.

So was it a trained hyena? At this point, Menatory joined a number of writers who had accused Antoine Chastel, father of Jean Chastel who seemed to have put an end to the terror. Did Antoine Chastel not have the reputation of a being a wolf tamer?



One suddenly remembers the remarkable incident that occurred during the Beauterne-episode: father and son Chastel purposely drove a group of Antoine's hunters into the marsh. The duped men managed to save themselves and the Chastels were sentenced to jail for a short while. Whatever haunted them? A joke, according to some. But is it really a coincidence that precisely Jean Chastel was the person who laid down the Beast? Did he know the Beast perhaps? Was he fed up with his father's sinister extravagances?

It is very likely, according to R.F. Dubois, that Jean Chastel knew the Beast; probably his father had trained the animal with the purpose of killing. But again to Dubois, it was not a hyena, but a harnessed killer dog! A dog of all creatures! Perhaps an offspring of the terrifying war dogs bred and trained to attack enemy armies.

**But will a dog eat its victims in such a ghastly way?
Whatever the nature of the monster, chances are real that the animal was trained by a sadist murderer, of the same type as Gilles de Rais.
Then what was the motif? Dubois: what was Gilles de Rais' motif to butcher more than one hundred innocent children?
But then, what about the superstitious talk of the peasants and villagers of Gévaudan? Or were they not so crazy after all? What drove them to figure out something human in the Beast? The intuitive knowledge that something of the Beast is in each one of us, just waiting for the right moment, the right circumstances to show its teeth?...**



Sources:

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