The Beast of Gévaudan

It was a dark time for France. By 1763, France had been defeated in the Seven Years War, losing colonial lands to the British and Spain. King Louis XV's reign was experiencing both heavy corruption and debt from the war. In rural areas of France, villages and farms were largely left to fend for themselves.

In April of 1764, in the area of Gévaudan, France, a young shepherdess was attacked by a ferocious creature "like a wolf, yet not a wolf" but escaped when the cattle drove off the beast. Two months later, another young shepherdess was viciously attacked and killed. Thus began a serious of terrifying attacks on women, children and lone men by a mysterious beast or beasts. Ultimately, more than 100 people would be killed by "La Bête du Gévaudan."

Descriptions of the man-eating beast by witnesses varied, but generally the creature was described as canine in appearance, but much larger, the size of a cow or horse. The beast had a long, tufted tail, and its reddish-brown fur was marked with a black stripe down it's back. The head and legs of beast were covered in short fur. Its paws were large and taloned. It was an ambush hunter, stalking its prey and then seizing its victims by the throat or head. The victims were literally torn to pieces.

The citizens of Gévaudan offered bounties and organized hunts for the beast. In October of 1764, hunters tracked the creature near the Chateau de la Baume, and fired at the beast, which ran off. In January of 1765, the beast attacked a group of young boys, but the children drove it away. King Louis XV rewarded the brave children and sent the Royal Hunters to Gévaudan.

In September of 1765, Francois Antoine, the King's gunbearer, shot a large wolf near the Abbey at Chazes. Antoine, who was 71 years old, was awarded with money and titles. The wolf was stuffed and sent to be displayed at the Royal Court. But the attacks began again in December of that year.

Représentation de la Bête du Gévaudan qui a fait tant de ravage dans ce Pays et dans l'Auvergne, la qu'elle'a été tuée le 20.ᵉ Septembre dernier par M.ʳ Antoine chevalier de S.ᵗ Louis, seul Porte Arquebuse de sa Majesté, et présentée le 1.ᵉʳ Octobre au Roy et a la Famille Royale par M.ʳ Antoine de Beauterne Fils. Pour que cet Animal se conservât, dans son naturel, on l'a disseque, embaumé et attaché sur une planche tel qu'il est ici représenté. A Paris chez Mondhare rue S. Jacques a l'Hotel Sun.

Despite the renewed violence against the people of Gévaudan, the King insisted that the Beast had been killed. The attacks continued. After a series of deaths occurred in June of 1767, a hunt was organized by Marquis d'Apcher. A local man, Jean Chastel, shot and killed a large wolf on Mount Mouchet soon after. The beast had the non-wolf appearance noted by witnesses. It also had human remains in its stomach. After this, the attacks ended. The Beast of Gévaudan was dead.