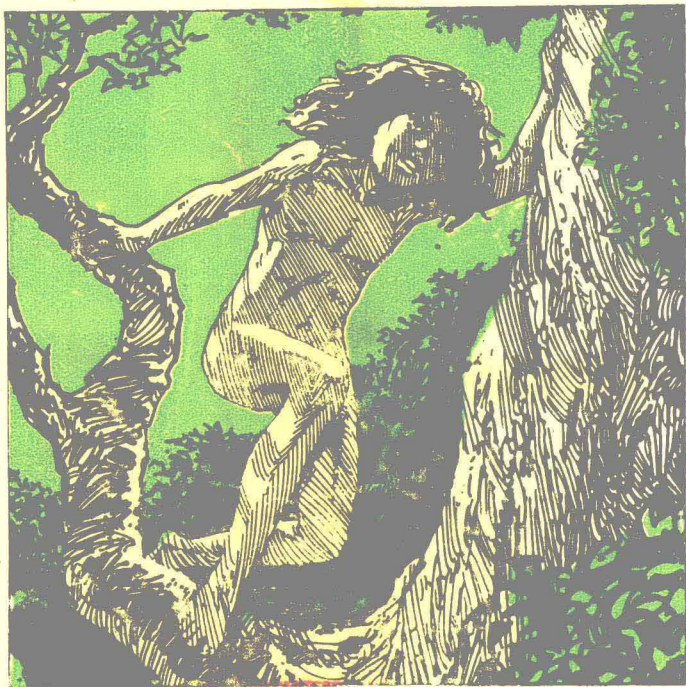


The Wild Boy



DAVID WHARRY



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David Wharry

Series Editor: John McRae

Edward Arnold

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Chapter 1

The Forest

This story begins in a forest in a part of Southern France called the Aveyron. It is a true story.

It is a cold morning in March 1797. Grey clouds cover the tops of the Lacaune Mountains. The forest is dripping after heavy rain. There is still snow here and there, in dark places under the trees. But Spring is near.

Three wolves move quickly and silently through the wet forest. They are hungry and thin after the long winter. Suddenly they stop. They have heard strange sounds. They listen and hear the sounds again. The wind brings the smell of men to them.

The men are hunters. A few minutes ago they saw a boy in the forest. He was afraid of them and ran away. Now they have captured him.

The boy is naked and very dirty. He has cuts and scars all over his body and his hair is very long. Even more strange: he walks like an animal, on four legs, using his arms as front legs. The men ask him who he is, they talk to him, but he does not understand. He cannot speak. He is about nine years old, they think.

The Wild Boy



The boy is very afraid and is trying hard to escape. But the man who holds him is too strong. He bites the man's hand and runs away. They run after him but this time they do not catch him.

Two years pass before anyone sees the boy again.

It is a hot afternoon in July 1799. Five hunters are out in the forest. They go up into the hills each summer to kill young wolves. These men have dogs. The dogs chase the boy and he climbs up a tree. The men arrive. They look up, expecting to see a wild cat or a bear. Imagine their surprise when they see the boy! He does not escape this time. The men tie him with rope and take him to their village.

They keep him prisoner in a house. He refuses all food except potatoes and nuts. They show him how to cook potatoes in the fire. He squats in the corner of the room and tries to bite people who come too near.

After ten days he escapes. He runs away into the woods. He runs for a long time, higher and higher into the hills of the Aveyron, far away from men. When he cannot run any more he stops by a mountain stream.

He lies down and drinks, with his tongue, like animals do. He eats some fruit growing on a bush, then rests. He watches the sparkling water, and the sun shining through the roof of leaves above. He is almost asleep when he notices movement near him.

The Wild Boy



A snake. It has killed a frog and is swallowing it. He kills the snake with a stone and eats the frog. Then he goes to sleep. He dreams of the forest.

Chapter 2

Fame

The winter of 1800 is the coldest for many years. Everywhere in France, people without houses are dying of hunger and disease. In the Aveyron, wolves and even bears are coming down into villages to find food.

Ice hangs from the roofs of the village of Saint-Sernin. The snow shines like silver in the moonlight. It is 8th January 1800, just before dawn.

Mr Vidal's house is outside the village. He wakes up suddenly. It is still dark and his chickens are making a lot of noise. He runs outside and sees something moving in his garden. A naked boy! – scratching in the frozen ground for roots and potatoes. Vidal shouts, runs to the boy. He is so cold and hungry he does not try to escape.

Vidal takes him inside. That morning, villagers come to see the wild boy. Everyone is amazed. How can anyone survive in the forest in winter? They try to communicate with him, with words, with signs. He does not understand. They begin to think he is deaf and dumb.



The mayor of Saint-Sernin, Constans Saint-Estève, arrives. The boy is squatting by the fire, watching the flames. He is very afraid of everyone around him.

Saint-Estève takes him gently by the hand. The boy tries very hard to pull his hand away, making little guttural sounds. The mayor lets go. He smiles at the boy, strokes him gently, many times. Slowly, the boy becomes less and less afraid. He lets the man hold his hand. Saint-Estève takes him to his house.

The boy is tired and very hungry. Madame Saint-Estève gives him some fresh bread. He holds it to his nose, sniffs it, tastes it, and immediately spits it out. Earlier, at Vidal's house, he ate some stale bread. Saint-Estève now gives him some. He eats it.

Mme Saint-Estève brings a large plate with cooked meat, raw meat, apples, pears, walnuts, chestnuts, acorns, potatoes, parsnips, raisins, and an orange. The boy's hand goes straight to the acorns. He eats them quickly. Then he takes a potato. He puts it in the fire. A few minutes later he puts his hand in'to the flames and takes the potato from the red hot coals. He does not seem to feel any pain at all. He eats the burning hot-potato, looks around and sees a jug of water. He takes Saint-Estève by the hand and leads him to the jug. He hits it to show he wants water. Saint-Estève pours some into a bowl. The boy drinks it with his tongue.

With great difficulty, Saint-Estève puts a shirt on him. For an hour he tries to take it off, biting it, tearing it with his teeth. Later, he falls asleep in front of the fire. He sleeps until the next morning.

That night, while he is asleep, some villagers come to Saint-Estève's house. They drink wine, eat sheep's cheese and talk.

Who is he?

How long has he lived like a wild animal in the forest?

Why does he have the scar of a very bad cut on his throat?

Did someone try to kill him?

Did his parents try to kill him?

Did they leave him in the forest to die?

Or did he run away from home when he was small – because his parents were cruel to him?

Why does he have so many scars all over his body?

Are they the bites and scratches of animals?

Saint-Estève stays awake that night, thinking about the boy. How can he help this poor child? He has an idea.

Some years ago, in 1792, he was a member of the new French Parliament so he has important friends who can help him. The next day he writes to a friend in the Government in Paris, telling him about the wild boy. 'He is deaf and perhaps dumb, an extraordinary, savage creature. His case is

of great interest to science and medicine. Sicard, the famous doctor at the Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, must see him.'

The news spreads like wild fire. There are articles in all the newspapers. In a few weeks everyone in Paris is talking about the 'strange creature of the forest, half-animal, half-man'. Doctors, scientists, and philosophers are impatient to examine this interesting 'specimen' of primitive man.

Lucien Bonaparte, Napoleon's brother, is Minister of the Interior. He demands to see the child in Paris.

The wild boy is famous.

Chapter 3

Victor

By the end of January all France knows about him. In March a musical comedy opens in Paris called *The Savage of the Aveyron*. It is a huge success. This verse from one of the songs is both funny and sad.

*If you don't know what freedom is,
How can you know you are free?
This simple boy of the woods,
Did not know he was free,
So we captured him,
To tell him.*

But we will not jump forward in time!

Saint-Estève finishes the letter to his friend in Paris. In the meantime, the boy can stay in the home for the poor in the village of Saint-Affrique.

Later that morning, Saint-Estève's servant leaves the kitchen door open. The boy runs outside when she is not looking, but she catches him before he escapes into the forest.

They give him his favourite food for lunch: raw chestnuts. He eats them happily. They wash his hands afterwards and give him a towel. He throws it

away and takes ashes from the fire. He rubs his hands with them and smiles – as if to say, ‘this is my way of drying my hands’.

He is no longer afraid. That afternoon Saint-Estève tickles him to see if he laughs. He smiles, making little guttural noises in his throat.

The next day two policemen take him to the home for the poor in Saint-Affrique. They tell the director to watch him all the time and lock him up at night – otherwise he will escape.

For many days, he refuses to wear clothes or to sleep in a bed. He bites people who oppose him and walks four-legged like an animal nearly all the time. He loses interest in everything and sleeps more and more, sometimes sleeping all day. He tries to escape several times. One day, in the garden, he tries to break the bars of the gate to get out.

The director notices something interesting. If he shows the boy a rope, he immediately holds up his arms and waits for his hands to be tied together. Why is this?

After a month, Lucien Bonnaterre, Professor of Natural History at the Central School in Rodez, and a famous botanist, offers to take care of the wild boy.

It is the afternoon of 4th February 1800. A noisy crowd is waiting by the Central School. Everybody