

The Story of Victor d'Aveyron, the Wild Child

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SCAN FOR
MULTIMEDIA

About the Author

Eloise Montalban (b. 1987) grew up in a small town in South Dakota. She enjoys writing but her first love is teaching. Eloise is currently living in Japan where she teaches English to Japanese children.

BACKGROUND

Feral children are human children who have grown up in the wild, either raised by animals or surviving on their own. There have been stories of feral children throughout history, and even in the modern day, there are occasional news stories about children growing up outside of human society.

NOTES

- 1 **O**ne day in 1797, a boy was found wandering naked in the woods near the town of Saint-Sernin-sur-Rance in France. He was caught and brought into the town, but he escaped a few days later. He was seen again in 1789 and 1799. Then, in 1800, he came into the town by himself.
- 2 The villagers guessed that he was about 12 years old. He couldn't speak and had many scars on his body. Also, he didn't like to eat the food the people in town ate—for example, he preferred to eat raw meat. These things made people think that he had been living alone in the woods for a long time. The villagers were kind to him, but soon doctors and scientists heard about the boy and came to examine him. They were especially interested in him because at that time, many people talked and argued about what makes people human. They thought that language was one of the main things that made people human, yet here was a boy who didn't know how to speak. Was he human? Could he be taught to speak and behave like a human?

- 3 Shortly after he started to live in the town, he was examined by a local biology professor. The professor had the boy remove his clothes and then took him out into the snow. The boy was not at all upset about being naked in the snow. He played happily. This led the professor to believe that the boy was used to being naked outdoors, even in the winter.
- 4 The boy was taken to another town where two men whose sons had gone missing during the French Revolution met him. Their sons would have been about the same age as the boy, but neither of the men thought he was their son. There were rumors about whose child he might be, but no one ever claimed him as theirs.
- 5 Although the boy could hear, he was taken to the National Institute for the Deaf so that Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard, a well-known instructor of the deaf, could study him. Sicard belonged to a group called the Society of Observers of Man, who believed they could learn about the relationship of man to society by studying the boy and teaching him. After a year, Sicard was unhappy with the boy's lack of progress. He stopped trying to teach him and let the boy roam around the institute.
- 6 A young doctor at the institute, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, became interested in the boy and named him Victor. Itard brought Victor home to live with him. He wanted to know if Victor could learn language and empathy. Itard believed that these two things were what made humans different from animals. He worked with Victor for 5 years. Itard came up with new methods to teach Victor words, which were used later to teach children with disabilities. Victor learned to understand language and could read some words. However, he made little progress after a certain point and never learned to speak. Itard wrote, "Under these circumstances his ear was not an organ for the appreciation of sounds, their articulations¹ and their combinations; it was nothing but a simple means of self-preservation which warned of the approach of a dangerous animal or the fall of wild fruit."
- 7 Itard believed that Victor learned to have empathy for other people; as an example of this, he told the story of Victor trying to comfort Itard's housekeeper when he saw her crying over the death of her husband. Victor eventually moved in with the housekeeper and lived with her until his death in 1828. He would have been about 40 years old at that time.
- 8 Today, doctors speculate that Victor may have had a condition, such as autism, that caused his family to abandon him in the woods. This would also explain his inability to speak. Regardless, he made an interesting case study because scientists would never intentionally deprive a child of a family in order to study the results. While Itard thought that Victor chose not to speak, doctors

1. **articulations** (ahr tihk yuh LAY shuhnz) *n.* ways of pronouncing words and syllables.

now would agree that he missed a developmental² window of opportunity. By the time Itard began to teach him, it was believed that Victor's brain was no longer capable of learning language. We would still say that he was definitely human in spite of his inability to speak and his "wild" behavior. 🐾

2. **developmental** (dih vehl uhp MEHN tuhl) *adj.* having to do with stages of growth.