

## First Recorded Quintuplets in Africa

BY

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### THE REPORT

The purpose of this article is to bring to the notice of our profession what is almost certainly the first authentic record of the birth of quintuplets in Africa. The report is by a layman, A. J. Mounteney-Jephson, one of H. M. Stanley's officers on the Emin Pasha relief expedition (1887-1889), and the description appears on page 187 of Jephson's book, *The Rebellion at the Equator* (1890).

Jephson's other claim to fame is that, together with T. H. Parke, surgeon to the expedition, he was one of the first two civilised men to sight Ruwenzori, the fabled "Mountains of the Moon" (Shee, 1966). In 1888 Jephson had been detached by Stanley to join Emin near Lake Albert in what is now Uganda. At the same time, Stanley plunged back into the Congo rain forest to rescue some of his own rearguard. It was at this time that Emin's Egyptian officers mutinied and placed Emin and Jephson under what would now be called "house arrest" at Dufilé, on the upper Nile. Later, Jephson was released and allowed to travel back to the lake to try to find Stanley. It was while at Wadelai, near the exit of the Nile from Lake Albert, that he wrote:

"Signor Marco came in and I transacted a good deal of business with him and arranged things according to Emin's request. He told me that the rebel officers were closeted with those of Wadelai, but were sitting with closed doors and he had as yet been unable to hear anything. He told me also the surprising fact that a week before, a native woman had given birth to five children, three boys and two girls. One of the boys had died, but the rest were doing well, as was also the mother. The children were

small, but otherwise well formed; the father was a wretched-looking little fellow who was badly wounded four years before at Rimo during the Mahdi war. I sent the woman a present of ten dollars!"

Jephson does not give the race of the mother, but she was probably a negress from the Southern Sudan, as were most of the "wives" of Emin's Egyptian and Nubian soldiers. The Signor Marco, mentioned in the report, was a Greek trader who was forced to remain in Equatoria when the Mañdi's troops severed Emin's line of communication with Egypt through the Sudan. He then became Emin's major domo and general man of affairs.

It is remarkable and saddening to reflect that *Homo sapiens*, the only biological species so far described as capable of ratiocination and logical thought, is also the only naturally occurring race of beings whose members exhibit excessive gullibility and a seeming urge for self-deception. The implicit belief in the preternatural powers of witches and warlocks which was held by all in medieval Europe has today, among the educated classes, given way to an equally touching faith in the omniscience of nuclear physicists and professors of economics. Likewise, those readers who first open their Sunday newspapers at "What the Stars Hold for You" are not necessarily the least gifted.

In no aspect of human behaviourism do we appear so eager to be deceived as in the folklore attached to the two ultimates of sentient being—life and death. Thus a Countess of Hainault in the fourteenth century was widely credited with giving birth to 365 stillborn foetuses at one parturition. With equal credulity, until recently, most readers of the Old Testament were prepared to believe that a quasi-historical character named Methusaleh lived to the age of 969 years.

Bearing the foregoing consideration in mind, the greatest scepticism must be exercised in the assessment of reports of multiple pregnancies.

#### FREQUENCY OF MULTIPLE BIRTHS

In 1895 Hellin first stated the mathematical relationship between the various order of multiple births. He concluded that twins occur once in 89 births, triplets in 89<sup>2</sup> and quadruplets once in 89<sup>3</sup>. A. F. Guttmacher (quoted in *William's Obstetrics*, 1956) examined the incidence of twins and triplets among 57 million births reported in the U.S.A. and found marked racial differences,

with all orders of plural births least common in the Mongolian races, most common in the negro and an intermediate frequency in the whites. This and other research showed that Hellin's theory was more a mathematical approximation than a biological law. Thus in the U.S.A. Guttmacher found that the rate of twinning among whites was 1 per 92.4 births and among non-whites (mostly negroes) 1 per 73.8 births.

In the future, rates for multiple pregnancies will be further upset by the use of drugs to promote pregnancy in infertile women. Among 300 pregnancies following the use of Clomiphene, 25 were multiple, including one set of quadruplets and two sets of triplets (Kistner, 1965). Similarly, there is an increase of multiple pregnancies in women who become pregnant as a result of treatment with human pituitary gonadotrophins (Gemzell, 1962).

The writer has been unable to find any earlier records of quintuplets born in Africa. That invaluable compendium, *The Guinness Book of Records* (1966), states that sextuplet births are indisputable and that throughout the world there are six recorded cases of quintuplets in which all survived. One of these sets consisted of three boys, Kolekile ("Happy"), 5 lb. 2 oz.; Tembikile ("Trusted"), 4 lb. 12 oz.; and Mbambile ("Devoted"), 4 lb. 12 oz.; and two girls, Zoleka ("Serenity"), 4 lb. 12 oz., and Tandeka ("Beloved"), 4 lb. 2 oz., born to Mrs. Nogesi Gquzulu, aged about 37, the wife of Tafini Mtukutetse, in the Frère Hospital, East London, Republic of South Africa, on 26th February, 1966.

It is rather remarkable that of the five babies reported by Jephson, four lived, in spite of the qualor which then must have prevailed at Dufilé. If any of these four is still alive he or she is now an old man or woman of 80 years.

If we assume that in 1888 the total population of Africa was 50 million, or approximately one-quarter of what it is today, it is likely that we would not be wildly incorrect, although perhaps guilty of an over-estimate, since it is usually agreed that the autochthonous population of Rhodesia alone has increased tenfold since the European occupation in 1890. If we likewise assume that the annual birthrate at that time in Africa was 40 per 1,000 and the frequency of twin births among indigenous Africans was one in 74, or approximately the same as it is in Coloured people in the modern U.S.A., then the chance of quintuplets being born in the whole of Africa would not be more than once in 15 years at that time.

It is therefore a considerable coincidence that Jephson was present at the appropriate time and place to record this multiple birth. Written reports of this type are particularly unlikely to have emerged from Africa. Until 150 years ago, literacy on the Continent was practically confined to the Cape peninsula at the southern tip and to a few scattered strips along the Mediterranean littoral. Also, among people of the Bantu ethnic or linguistic group, multiple parturition, not merely of humans but also in domesticated animals, was regarded as an abominable *lusus naturae*, probably resulting from witchcraft, and not only the report but the product of such a birth was likely to be suppressed.

#### SUMMARY

The first published account of the birth of human quintuplets in Africa is brought to the notice of the medical profession. This event occurred in the year 1888 at Dufilé, in what is now Uganda, and was recorded by a layman, A. J. Mounteney-Jephson.

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