



My DIARY of Three Years with the DIONNE QUINTUPLETS

by Nurse YVONNE LEROUX

By Yvonne Leroux
Part I



Yvonne Leroux . . . Below, a daily scene on the porch of the Dionne home during the early infancy of the quintuplets.

ON the afternoon of Monday, May 28, 1934, I was sitting in the nurses' residence of St. Joseph's Hospital at North Bay, Ontario, with nothing more to occupy my mind than the thought that I had finally achieved the age of 21 and should, therefore, enroll myself as a voter for the approaching provincial election.

My diary entry for May 28 reads: "3 p. m. Same old day. I'm so tired I could drop. Two septic and two lung cases."

And then, after a brief gap, there is this notation:

"Sister Felicitas (the superintendent) has asked me to take a case in the country. One never knows what one is heading for on these country cases. Wonder what it is? Oh, well—"

One never knows—I never wrote a

about the drive to the Dionne farm. I must have been in a daze. But I will never forget the picture that met my eyes in that farmhouse—five incredibly tiny creatures in a butcher's basket, covered with a white blanket that smelled of moth balls. They were wrapped in old but clean rags, pieces of shirts, diapers, and so on, and they were crying like tiny mewling kittens.

For the next few days I had precious little time to make any entries in a diary. I simply jotted down words and phrases hurriedly, disconnectedly. Here is my entry for that first night:

"What have we here—Quintuplets—(and a mother)—premature—seven months—rickety—hungry—about three drops fill them to the top. Mosquitoes, dirt, flies and neighbors—nothing except above—oh, oh—"



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are so very, very tiny.

"This morning they had to be cleaned. The kitchen stove was the only place to do it. Paraphernalia: a saucer of olive oil, some soft rags, larger pieces of the cleanest and warmest cloths I could find, some boracic acid and a prayer. Each babe was done on my knee at the oven door; temperature of room must have been about 100 degrees.

"Brought out basket and placed it on chairs near stove. The babies are so very skinny—they fit into the palm of my hand.

"Dr. Dafoe came in and ordered a formula of milk, corn syrup, and water. The babes were hungry and I gave them two eye droppers full (30 drops). The Red Cross nurse brought some breast milk in the afternoon; gave it to the three smallest. Got more hot water bottles, absorbent, diapers, and flannellette from Callander women. Made absorbent cotton coats for the babes."

The next day's entry was less hopeful:

"May 31. Babes holding their own and that's all. All kinds of blue spells. Bowels not good—babes jaundiced yel-

is sent to them. They'll live—oh I'm sure they'll live. They are so tiny, though. . . . I was relieved at midnight. How nice my bed—and did I sleep."

"June 3. Madame de Kiriline has arrived. She and Miss C. organized a nursery in the parlor, scrubbed, washed, and cleared out everything and installed a big incubator—heated with crocks. Keep a boiler of hot water on stove.

"Jaundice is definitely established. The babes are so dark that it makes them look very bad indeed. They have been named—Yvonne, Annette, Cecile, Emilie, and Marie, in order of size. We have small tags on their coats with their names on them. Weights: Marie—1½ pounds!! Emilie—2 pounds 1 ounce, or so. Cecile—about 2½ pounds. Annette—about the same. Yvonne (my pet)—2 pounds 13 ounces or so."

"JUNE 4. Babes had their oil bath in the new nursery this morning. We have to work fast to prevent chilling. It's funny, too, we don't dare rub too hard because of the delicate skins, and we feel as if we were handling baby chicks. The legs and arms might come off."

Now follows a more hopeful entry: "June 5. Jaundice is improved a great deal. All babes gained in weight this a. m. Dr. William Dafoe (Dr. Allan Dafoe's brother, from Toronto) came today to have a look at the babes. He advises oxygen to help them breathe, and we'll have some sent to us."

"June 7. Yvonne looks like a very big baby when placed beside Marie. They are beginning to look forward to feeding time. They lick their lips and let out small annoyed cries. . . . Jaundice is gone."

"June 11. Babes are very languid today and hard to feed. Coloring not so good. Are using rum and oxygen."

And then comes an entry which, while very brief, meant a great deal to all of us:

"July 17. Quintuplet living record broken today—and it looks as if they can still hold their own."

In the last 500 years there have been 32 authentic cases of quintuplets recorded. No group of five lived longer than an hour or so; the longest any member of a group of five lived was 50 days. So when these five little Dionnes got past that 50-day mark, we had reason to feel tremendously elated over the accomplishment.

NEXT WEEK: A nurse's heroism averts a tragedy in the nursery; the first Christmas.



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Nurses de Kiriline and Leroux weighing the babies, sketched from a photograph.

truer or a more apt sentence in all my life.

I had been instructed to go to Callander and get in touch with Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe. Now I was born and grew up in Callander just two doors from Dr. Dafoe's home. Like everyone in that district, I admired and respected him immensely.

I went to Callander by bus, reaching there early in the evening, and went at once to the doctor's office. He greeted me with:

"Quintuplets—five babies at a single birth—a thing that doesn't happen once in a hundred years! What's more, they are premature. Seven-month babies. Do whatever you can, keep them warm and keep them quiet. Feed them sterilized water drop by drop from an eye dropper. Try to keep them alive. Do your best and I'll be with you as much as I can."

To this day I don't recall a thing

What a recollection those jumbled words call up!

We had mosquitoes by night and flies by day, as there were no screens on the house; there were, likewise, no hot water bottles, no absorbent cotton, no proper dishes, no blankets. Tiny as they were, the babies were crowded in that one basket. They sounded rather like the ever-present mosquitoes when they cried.

THE next night I was able to make a coherent diary entry. Here it is:

"May 29. Well, things are a little better. The babes seem stronger. But they

lowish. Milk of magnesia given in milk."

It was necessary to give the little mites enemas the next day. Dr. Dafoe did this with a syringe, while Miss Cloutier, the Red Cross nurse, and I held the babes. It was a terrible strain to work with such tiny creatures; we had to give them minute quantities of rum right afterward, they were so exhausted. My diary entry for the day read:

"June 1. I'm dead tired. Miss Cloutier has been coming in for an hour or two but I'm dead—I'm dying. The babes are living, though. Breast milk



Mrs. Dionne and the five amazing babies, photographed for the first time a few days after their birth.