

# FAMILY TREE

## MARY SEACOLE, PART I: A MATTER OF LIFE...

National Library of Jamaica

England not only produced heroes during the Crimean War but two outstanding heroines as well. The struggles and triumphs of Florence Nightingale have been duly acknowledged. But the name Mary Seacole evokes little recognition.

Mrs. Mary Seacole, daughter of a Black woman and a Scotch officer, was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in the early nineteenth century. Her mother, a respected "doctress," operated Blundell Hall, a boarding house catering mainly to British officers and their wives stationed at Newcastle and the adjacent camp at Up-Park.

For a short time Mary lived with a relative at nearby Water Lane, but by the age of 12, most of her time was spent at her mother's house attending to invalid officers or their wives. Growing up in this atmosphere contributed to Mary's interest in medicinal art. Some years later, she married John Seacole, a considerably older and sickly man. Soon after marriage, they moved to Black River hoping his health would improve. Mary established a small store there, but John's health deteriorated and they returned to Kingston, where he died within a few months.

Following this misfortune came the death of her mother, whose only legacy was Blundell Hall. The building was nearly destroyed in 1843 by the Kingston fire, but Mary's determination and perseverance gradually rebuilt it into a thriving business. Despite this success, Mary left the managerial duties to her sister, Louisa, in order to devote more time to her first love, the practice of medicine. During the cholera epidemic in 1850, which claimed more than 31,000 lives, she worked with doctors as a fledgling nurse, gaining firsthand knowledge of the disease and developing a medicine that produced remarkable results.

After the epidemic Mary went to Cruces, Panama, where her brother, Edward, had recently opened a hotel. Business boomed, influenced by the influx of adventurers seeking the riches of the California gold mines. Panama, with its unbearably hot and humid climate, was a breeding ground for tropical diseases. Yellow fever, cholera, and malaria ran rampant because of improper sanitary conditions



and medical care. It was only a matter of time before Mary's recent medical experience was tested in a cholera epidemic that swept through the town. Cruces had no doctor and its residents were reluctant to accept treatment from a stranger, especially a woman. As they watched the death toll mount, they were soon forced to seek Mary's help and before long, her firm but gentle approach won their confidence. As the epidemic ran its course, the townspeople, most of whom were poor, came to depend on "the yellow woman from Jamaica with the cholera medicine." White Americans there, some of whom she had treated, gave a Fourth of July banquet in her honor.

While proposing a toast to one of them expressed the regret that she was not white and cynically suggested that her skin be bleached. Mary replied, "I must say that I don't altogether appreciate your friendly kind wishes with regard to my complexion and the offer of bleaching me. I should, even if it were practicable, decline it without any thanks. As for the society which the process might admit me to, judging from the specimens I have met here and elsewhere, I don't think I shall lose much by being excluded from it. So, I drink to the general reformation of American manners."

Excluding an eight-month period in Jamaica in 1853, part of which was spent fighting recurring yellow fever epidemics, Mary lived in Panama.

When Great Britain declared war against Russia the following year,

Mary learned that many of the officers who had been guests at Blundell Hall were being shipped to the Crimean front. She wanted to be where her knowledge of the diseases cholera, dysentery and fever, then prevalent in the Crimea, could be of value. At that time, women in the British army, in any capacity, were rare. Front-line reports of unsanitary and understaffed hospitals brought public outrage that changed this practice. Men were dying from disease and starvation than battlefield injuries. These were all results of military red tape and mismanagement of government funds.

Overcoming innumerable obstacles, Florence Nightingale convinced the government to allow her to head the first contingent of nurses bound for the area now occupied by the main military hospital at Scutari, Turkey.

Mary arrived at the London enlistment office in January 1854, and applied to all battle sectors, including Florence Nightingale's own organization. Her responses were negative.

Disturbed by the thought of possible racial discrimination Mary wrote of her encounters: "Was it possible that American prejudices against color had taken root here? Did they shrink from accepting my aid because my blood flowed beneath a somewhat dusker skin than theirs?"

The anger of rejection only stoked her fires of determination and she soon devised a scheme that would get her to the Crimea. She would go as a sutler, a common name applied to those who followed the army selling provisions.

Since she had little capital, Mary tried to solicit both public and private funds, but was unsuccessful. She presented her idea to a Mr. Day, distantly related to her late husband, whom she had met in Cruces. He was bound for the Crimea on shipping business. He invested in her venture and the partnership of Seacole and Day was formed, with Mary responsible for the managerial duties of the firm.

After ordering supplies and completing personal arrangements, Mary boarded the steamship *Hollander* in January, 1855, for the 3,000-mile journey to the Crimea. —by Anita King

NEXT MONTH: Part II. The Crimea