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 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 medical 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 1855, which claimed more than 31,000 lives, she worked with doctors as a nursing aide, gaining firsthand knowledge of the disease and developing a medicine that produced remarkable results.

After the epidemic Mary went to Cuba, 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. Nurses 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 became long, her firm but gentle approach won their confidence. As the epidemic ran its course, the townsmen, 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, one of them expressed the regret 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 in 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. She was occupied by a medical officer at Scutari, Turkey. Mary arrived at the London enlistment office in 1854 and applied to all arms of the service, including Florence Nightingale's own organization, but responses were negative.

Taken by the thought of possible discrimination, Mary wrote of her sentiments, "Was it possible that American prejudice against color had taken root here? Did they shrink from accepting my aid because of my blood drained beneath a somewhat dusky skin than theirs?"

Whether motivated by greed or patriotism only stoked her ire 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 case to Mr. Day, distantly related to her late husband, whom she had met in the Barbados. He was bound for the West Indies, and the partners, Seacole and Day were formed, with Mary responsible for the management of the firm.

After ordering ships and completing personal arrangements, Mary boarded the steamship Hollar in January, 1855, for the 3,000-mile journey to the Crimea.

Mary Seacole, Part I: A Matter of Life

Next Month: Part II The Crimea