OF
MARY SEACOLE

On the campus of the University of the West Indies there is a “Mary Seacole Hall.” The headquarters of the Nurses' Association of Jamaica has been named “Mary Seacole House.” At the Kingston Public Hospital there is a “Mary Seacole Ward.” All this has been done in a conscious attempt to perpetuate the name of a great Jamaican, and an ever greater nurse, one whom the Americans referred to as “the angel of mercy,” the Cubans termed “the yellow woman with the cholera medicine,” and the Crimean soldiers hailed as the Florence Nightingale of Jamaica.

I suspect, however, that there might be some nurses to whom the names of the Headquarters House means little or nothing at all. For such women, the Mary Seacole House provides no “rallying point,” stirs no emotions, imparts no inspiration, provokes no loyalty. It is particularly of these persons that I think as I attempt, quite incompletely, to refer the high points in the life of this great woman.

Mary Seacole was born in 1805 and died at the age of 76 in 1881. In her autobiography, “Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands,” she did not disclose her age, remarking that it was a feminine privilege. She did say, however, that “the century and myself were both young together, and we have grown up side by side into age and consequence.” She herself said that she was born in Kingston, but in 1838 when Mr. Frank Cundall published that information, a writer to the Gleaner contradicted it. This writer said that Mary was born at Haughton, near Kingstou in St. Elizabeth, and as a young woman went to live in Black River.

Mary tells very little about her childhood and early life. Her mother was a coloured woman who kept a boarding house in Kingston. Her father was a Scottish soldier. She often refers to “mother’s house” and once speaking about Black River, she mentioned her father’s house. She tells now when a young girl she was taken over an ill man and brought up to the hospital. She was able to share the sick and comfort them, and also that she was sick herself. She says: “I might have left, but I stayed, for it seemed to indicate that Mary was an illegitimate child, and the admission that she was not prepared to make. She has a sister (Mrs. Louise Grant) to whom she left the Burwell Hall bequested to them both by their mother.

Mary’s mother had a reputation of being a “Doctoress” because she ministered to the sick tailor and soldiers (from Up Park Camp and Newcastle) who frequented her table. From the Mary learned the art of healing and the love of caring for the sick. From about the age of twelve Mary began to share with her mother the task of attending upon army officers and their wives. While young, she had the opportunity of visiting England twice (for a total of three years), as waiting-companion and nurse of an old lady. These trips only whetted Mary’s appetite for travel, and not long after her return to Jamaica, she visited Nassau, Panama, Haiti and Cuba.

On her return to Kingston, Mary states that she nursed her old “indigent patients, in her long last illness,” and that after her death, she (Mary) went back to live at her mother’s house. There she met and married Mr. John Seacole; and took him down to Black River, where they established a store. He was an elderly man then, and very sickly, so Black River was certainly a poor choice. It is possible that Mary chose Black River because of her (alleged) earlier associations. Their sojourn there was brief; John became worse and they were forced to return to Kingston. Within a month after their return, John died. Mary states that she was “very sorrowful.”

Soon after this, Mary’s mother died and left Bermond Hall to her and her sister, Louise. The hotel was burnt to the ground in the great fire of 1843, but later rebuilt through the efforts of Mary. The venture met with even greater success, but Mary soon left the management of her sister, and devoted herself to “doctoring.” She was particularly good at handling feverish cases. In the big cholera epidemic of 1850, she volunteered as a nurse, and said to have learned much about the disease and its cure from trained physicians, and even perfected a medicine of her own.

Later, Mary visited Panama for a second time. This was during the California Gold Rush when thousands were crossing the Isthmus to ships going north on the Pacific Side. Sanitary conditions on the isthmus were very poor; there were diseases of every kind. Mary soon rented a building and opened a lodging-house and store. Before long her chief activity was caring for the sick foreigners, and to this task she gave of her best. It was here that she earned the title of “angel of mercy” from the Americans. It was here too, that a Yankee referred to her colour, and stated his regrets that he could not “bleach her colour” and so be able to claim her. In appropriate language, Mary retorted that when she came across people like him, she could not but feel happy that she escaped being white.

From Panama, she went to Cuba. There she ran into an epidemic of cholera and was again a great help. Here she was known as “the yellow woman from Jamaica with the cholera medicine.” This time she caught the disease, but cured herself and returned to Panama where she remained for a time. In 1853 (about April) she returned.