

John Easton Mills

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CARLYLE says that "worship of a hero is transcendent admiration of a great man." This admiration for those who have risen above the ordinary level of humanity, whose souls have been filled with a passion of sacrifice for some great and good cause, has been through all time and in all places deeply rooted in the heart of man. Yet, often it happens that a great one is too soon forgotten, a home hero neglected, and a name, from which a light should emanate to illumine the pathway of the lesser, is obliterated in the gloom of time.

Our beloved City of Montreal, in its rush of life, its clamour of commerce, its struggle for wealth and high places, seems still too young to linger on the way, and has seldom time to count the roll call of her heroic sons. So, it is well at times, from her dust begrimed annals to draw forth an honourable name and recall noble deeds "Lest we forget."

To the hallowed memory of a one-time Mayor of Montreal, John Easton Mills, Esquire, we will offer our humble tribute to-day.

Mr. Mills, who was born in the United States, came to Canada at an early age. He was characterized as a man of the loftiest principles, of the highest honour and integrity, and while still in the prime of life had acquired wealth and distinction, and was so much esteemed by his fellow-citizens that he was chosen to be the Chief Magistrate of the City.

To this honourable office he gave untiring energy and attention. His keen judgment, perseverance and zeal were at the time sorely needed and were entirely devoted to the important duties that he had undertaken, but the call of Charity was ever the sweetest to his ears. To a strong and determined will he joined the kindness of a woman, the simplicity of a child. The distressed and unfortunate found him ever ready with hand outstretched to raise and relieve. To every religious or benevolent enterprise he was the friend and patron. As proof of the breadth of his mind and sympathies, although differing in Faith, he generously contributed to the building of Saint Patrick's Church, and assisted the Ladies of the Sacred Heart in establishing their house of education in our midst.

It was in the year 1847, "Black '47," as it has been appropriately called, a cloud hung over the British Isles, so dense that people shuddered at the gloom that overwhelmed them. Ireland was in the throes of a famine so great that the history of no land can tell such an appalling tale. The potato crop had twice failed, and then came a blight that completely destroyed it, and that meant the destruction of the Irish peasantry. Gaunt misery stalked abroad. Hunger, Disease and Death

stood like grim spectres smiting without mercy the children of the Land. Over mountain passes and through valleys fair, the strong sons of Erin and her beautiful daughters wandered sunken-eyed and hollow-cheeked seeking for bread. Little children with pinched faces and pitiful moans cried: "I'm hungry! I'm hungry!" till they swooned in their mothers' arms and died. Shannon's shores and Killarney's banks were strewn with the bodies of those who had fallen by the wayside. Fever followed famine, a malignant form of Typhus, and hundreds upon hundreds fell like withered leaves before an Autumn blast. Contagion was in the air, and fear and despair in agonized human hearts. No wonder that they turned their burning eyes to the West, watched with starving gaze the corn ships on the horizon, and stretched their thin arms out to the sea. America, the Land of Promise, was there. America, teeming with milk and honey, which to their fevered brains seemed beckoning them on, on, over the wide ocean to a harbour of peace and plenty.

It was then that a melancholy exodus from the dear old Fatherland began, and a tide of helpless, hopeless emigration fled to the sea. It is not surprising to hear that these unfortunate people bore with them the seeds of the terrible malady from which they were flying, that in the long journey of from six to twelve weeks in unsanitary sailing ships, they sickened and died by thousands. Nor, should it astonish us that those destined for the United States, being British Subjects and infected, were refused admission to their ports. It was a dismal procession, a plague smitten fleet of eighty-four ships whose

white sails hung like shrouds, and whose holds were sepulchres, that passed up our glorious St. Lawrence one early summer morning when beauty dwelt in the valleys, and gladness sang on the hills!

Although Canada had been notified, it was not prepared for this terrible influx of disease and destitution. At Grosse Ile thousands of the dead and dying were landed, those in a better state of health were passed up the River, multitudes to be gathered in at Quebec, and Montreal to receive her appalling share.

Mayor Mills was president of the Immigration Committee, and his untiring energy and devotion to the cause of the distressed was ever unswerved by fatigue and undeterred by danger. Immigrant sheds were constructed at Point St. Charles, then beyond the limits of the City, and to these the unfortunate were brought.

This is a description of the first sheds:—

“There were six hospitals, total length one thousand
“and fifteen feet by twenty; with Surgery and seven
“out-houses; later on, another group of twenty-one
“hospitals, two thousand three hundred and sixty-
“four feet, with out-houses, etc., were added.”

Yet, these were not ample enough to shelter the numbers to be relieved. During three long summer months they still continued to arrive, and with terrifying power the fever raged.

It was then that the magnificent charity of the people of Montreal arose to a sublime height! Differences of language and religion were forgotten. Priest and Minister together side by side, not only attended to the spiritual wants of the sufferers, but dwelt amongst them

to relieve their physical pain. Several of both were victims of their duty. The Grey Nuns forsook their Convent to nurse the sick ; all of them contracted the disease and many of them died. The Providence Nuns and the Hotel-Dieu were valiant at their posts, and offered their holocausts. The venerable and beloved Canon Ellegoode who, alas, to-day lies seriously ill, the only one surviving of those who laboured so nobly in those days of distress, was then a very young pastor who was unflinching in his devotion. The Sulpicians closed their College to allow their staff of professors to give the dying the benefit of their care, and the saintly Bishop Bourget gave an example of heroic zeal and unparalleled charity which will never be forgotten.

And now, do I hear you ask: "Where was the Mayor?" Where the gallant soldier stands in the hour of direst peril, in the heat of the battle, in the heart of the fray, where the unsheathed steel, which casts a chill o'er timid hearts, sets the warm blood flaming in a hero's veins.

Mayor Mills during that dreadful summer, unflinching, unswerving, unfeared, gave his heart's best gifts to a people who had no claim upon him but that of common humanity.

The call of charity was ever the sweetest of all voices to his ear. So, during those months his business lay neglected, and his home knew him not. Go to the sheds at the midnight hour when doctors and nurses are seeking a moment's repose; the silence is unbroken except for the low moans of the dying, the rustling of rosaries and the murmur of prayers; behold a tall, dark form which passes on from bed to bed, here smoothing

the pillow beneath a fever-tossed young head, there lifting a cup to the parched lips of a strong man who smiles: "God bless you" through his burning pain. See him again in the morning dawn, pursuing his weary march from one shed to another, soothing, consoling, cheering and helping. Now he stops to take a last message from a dying father for those he left behind in the dear green land, and again, he lifts in his tender arms a little child who is unconsciously playing with her dead young mother's hand. His splendid health bore out during all these trying months, and with early autumn the fever abated, and hope returned.

But one morning the people with troubled brows met and asked each other "Where is the Mayor?" Alas, in the pitiless throes of an agony of fever which from the first he knows he will never arise again.

We are told that during these days no word of complaint, no murmur ever escaped his lips. His precious life which might still have blessed the city, that he governed so well, was passing slowly, quietly away. Going, just when the battle over, he might rest and wear his laurels, and when every lip was sounding his dear name with hallowed praise!

Another day arose on which the citizens with awe, in tear choked voices whispered to each other: "The Mayor is dead!" Nay, nay, such men do not die! Already the Angels have written his name on the Golden Tablets of Eternal Life!

Mayor Mills' funeral saw the City of Montreal in deepest mourning. Every place of business was closed,

and the citizens and the military with the Governor General at their head followed him to his last resting place.

When the History of Montreal is written, on the dark page of "Black '47" the name of John Easton Mills will shine, an illuminating example to her people for all time.

There are heroes who face the cannon's mouth and die for the honour of a flag, and heroes who earn the martyr's crown by fire and sword in far off wilds, but no greater hero is there than he who sacrifices his life on the altar of duty for charity's sweet sake!

BELLELE GUERIN.