



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

The Federal Government must come to the financial rescue of New York City and New York State without further delay unless the nation is to be plunged into the most catastrophic economic debacle in history. I have been personally involved in every American panic since 1893, when...—From a recent letter to the *Times* by Cyrus S. Eaton.

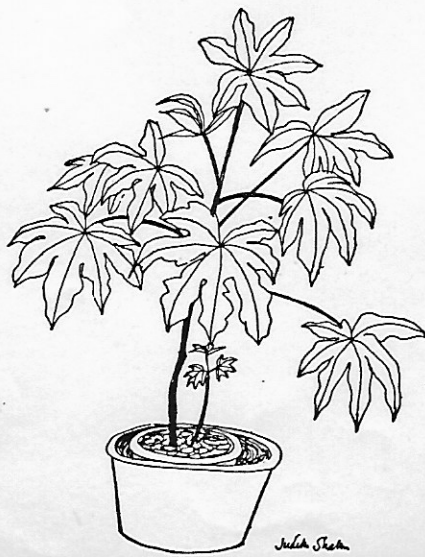
I'M perhaps the only living man who was personally and profoundly affected by the Depression of 1893, not to mention those of 1907 and 1929, and I don't want to spend my last years being affected by another big one, brought on by the default of New York City," Mr. Eaton, who will observe his ninety-second birthday next month, told us when we called on him the other morning on his farm outside Cleveland, where the man who practically invented détente has on modest display, along with other mementos of an extraordinary life, a Lenin Peace Prize. "In 1893, I was living at Pugwash, Nova Scotia, my birthplace, and my father, who was doing quite well in farming and lumbering and general merchandise, was about to move down to the States and join his brother Cyrus, for whom I was named, in the tin-plate business. Then the panic hit. Suddenly the American dollar was worth only fifty cents in Nova Scotia. My prudent father decided not to take a chance on a country in that kind of shape. We had a special interest in that depression up there because, as you doubtless recall, one of Grover Cleveland's ancestors had some Nova Scotia in his background. Poor Cleveland! That depression lasted all through his second Administration, and it was one of those economic catastrophes that are due less to any basic weakness in the nation than to the stupidity of statesmen. I was only ten years old at the time, but I had been interested in my father's business for quite a while. I had begun taking on responsibilities when I was four, and used to get on a horse in wintertime and drive the cattle

down from the barn to the brook. At five, I milked my first cow, though I must confess she was so good-natured my father said any idiot could manage her. At six, I got a job fetching water from a spring for some men who were laying railroad tracks nearby. I was paid fifty cents for a ten-hour day. My father was also the local postmaster, so next I began sorting the mail. Even before that, I had been looking at the Boston and Providence papers that came in to our Pugwash subscribers. As soon as I learned how to read, I began reading American newspapers—a very bad habit, which I still have. I have recently found myself more attracted, however, to Leibnitz, and Plutarch's 'Life of Lyncurgus.'"

Mr. Eaton turned back to the plight of New York. "You're suffering because of the whole national economy," he said. "Here's the greatest city we have, on the verge of collapse, and yet we've been spending countless billions trying to impose our system of life on remote countries like Cambodia. Mrs. Eaton and I have been to Cambodia. It used to be one of the most beautiful countries on earth. If New York goes, people all over the world will panic. I've been working quietly on your problem with some senators and congressmen, and I've exchanged some ideas

with Nelson Rockefeller, whom I've known since he was two. An able young man, Nelson, with no temptation to do anything dishonest financially. His paternal grandfather took care of that. I knew both his grandfathers well. When I first came to the United States, at the turn of the century, it was the summer I'd finished prep school. I was visiting my father's younger brother, who was pastor of Mr. John Rockefeller's church in Cleveland. That's John D., Senior, of course. When I checked in at my hotel, I saw a big sign saying that a night clerk was wanted, and I applied and was hired. Then my uncle took me over to the Rockefellers' for dinner, and when Mrs. Rockefeller asked what I was doing and I said I had just landed a fine summer job as a night clerk, she said, 'Oh, that's no job for someone like you! John, can't you do something for this young man?' He more or less had to offer me a job. I didn't know if the hotel could survive without me, so I demurred until I could ask the manager, and when I did, he said, 'You take it. If it were offered to me, I'd take it.'"

Mr. Eaton, a trim nonagenarian with snow-white hair and a ruddy complexion, was rather formally dressed in a dark-blue double-breasted suit, white shirt, gray tie, and highly polished black shoes. He said he had to fly to Baltimore that afternoon for a railroad meeting (he is chairman emeritus of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway), but expected to be back home for dinner. "I'm a competitor of the Penn Central, but I'm bound to say its bankruptcy was the greatest economic disaster in recent years," he told us. "The Penn Central was a marvellous property, and it could have survived if the cost of borrowing money hadn't been driven up so high because the government was spending it all over the world, on armaments, like a drunken sailor. If New York suffers the same fate as the Penn Central, you may never recover from it. Until lately, I went to my office, downtown,



Julia Stein

every day from eight to five, but now I generally come home at two, so I can walk around the farm. I'm mainly a farmer and a philosopher at present. You might say that I'm not technically qualified to use that 'philosopher,' but I do spend a great deal of time thinking about big problems. In any event, I'm in good health—though when you get to be my age your hearing's apt to be not so keen—and my doctors told me, when I last checked in with them, 'We can't see any end to you under a hundred.' The reason may be that for nearly fifty years I've been strictly adhering to a set of rules that the doctor who prescribed them said he wouldn't dream of observing himself: no tobacco, no alcohol, no tea, no coffee, and none of those indigestibles, like corned-beef hash. No corned-beef hash! It used to be my favorite. I played tennis up to a few years ago, but I quit it about the same time I quit skiing, having been persuaded to do so when the doctors said, 'At your age, if you break a leg we can't repair it for you.' ”

Mr. Eaton paused for a sip of orange juice. “By the way, I have family ties to New York City,” he went on. “My Eaton ancestors were all New Englanders who went to Canada before the Revolution. My mother, though, was a MacPherson, and her forebears were New York businessmen, who remained loyal to England and, after the surrender at Yorktown, were treated very roughly. Everything they owned was confiscated, and they were expelled to Nova Scotia. It was a little scar on American history. They were given a thousand acres at Pugwash in forced exchange for a substantial piece of property at the corner of Broadway and Wall Street. You know, this is a vast country, with enormous resources. But these panic spells, which are to so large an extent emotional, can be terribly destructive. If the greatest city in the world collapsed, it would be an awful blow to the capitalistic system. There's no perfect system anywhere, but generally I'm in favor of capitalism. As a philosopher, moreover, I try to look at the pros and cons of questions, and I've come to believe in compromise and moderation, which wouldn't be a very good philosophy, of course, on which to run for political office. Well, I'm not a candidate for anything, but I have an interest in America, and anybody who feels that way ought to be concerned about the financial soundness of a city as big as New York. With so many cultures and nationalities represented among your eight million people, New York is a tremendous experiment in modern so-

ciety, and the rest of the country has got to take it seriously.”

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