

CABBAGETOWN STORE by Vern McAree

Chapter 1

THE STORE WAS OUR HOME

CABBAGETOWN is not to be found on maps nor is it described in surveys. There may have been something slightly illegal about it, which would not lessen the attachment to it of those who lived there some sixty, seventy or eighty years ago. The word was applied to that part of Toronto lying south of Gerrard Street, north of Queen and east from Parliament Street to the Don.

Claims to have been old citizens of Cabbagetown put forth in later years by persons living beyond these boundaries have been properly disallowed and resented. The name was taken from the vegetable itself. In this area, which must have covered a couple of hundred acres, nearly every backyard was a garden of sorts and cabbages were the product most striking to the eye.

The people were mostly of English, Irish and Scottish descent. None of them were rich in those far-off days. Most families were glad to add to the yearly income the sale of fruits and vegetables that could be preserved or stored for winter use. Cabbages we must assume were easily grown, and when growing they had a lush and vigorous appearance which appealed strongly to the residents. Or, it may be that one of the early settlers began growing cabbages and thus set the fashion for those who came later.

At first the name was applied in a sort of derision. Later it became valued just as the British Expeditionary Force of 1914 considered it a badge of glory to be known as the Old Contemptibles of the Kaiser's phrase. The growth of the city had been toward the north, the west and the east. Northwest of Cabbagetown the greater density of population discouraged large gardens. North the city seemed to taper off and come to what many must have thought would be its last resting place in St. James' Cemetery. Going farther east and north, one soon came to market gardens. There may have been districts on the borders of the city to the west which had some of the outward characteristics of Cabbagetown. But the west end at that time was held to be populated by upstarts or even dudes. It did not have the old history of the east end, especially the North of Ireland traditions which had developed there.

It is doubtful if I would be regarded by the pedants as having been born in Cabbagetown, for I was born on the west side of the street¹. But I spent most of my boyhood and early adult life within the strict canon, and my home for most of these years was in the grocery store to which my heart so often returns.

¹ Vern was born at 180 Parliament Street at 4:10 p.m. on June 26, 1876. His mother Rebecca Fleming and her twin sister Isabella were born in Ireland, younger sisters of Aunt Polly. The twins, aged two, survived the rough Atlantic crossing in a sailing ship that cost the lives of their little brother and sister and a nine month old baby. Their oldest sister Eliza died at Grosse Ile. The family arrived in Toronto in 1850. Vern's mother Rebecca married John McAree, a Public Land Surveyor, whose parents came from Armagh in 1873. They had two sons, Vern and a younger brother Caul and a little sister Rebecca, who cost her mother her life. The Cabbagetown store became home to the three children after the death of their mother.

From this store, and members of the clan whose headquarters it was, there came in later years a Minister of Finance of Canada, a mayor of Toronto, a Speaker of the Ontario Legislature and a director of the T. Eaton Company, besides others of lesser celebrity². So if it appears that the store though small, and in a sense humble, was no ordinary store, and the family no ordinary family, it is my contention that appearances, in this instance at least, do not deceive.

My Uncle John³, who owned the store, was a small, dark, wiry Irishman with a black beard and an unusually large and well-shaped head. Earlier in life he had consulted a phrenologist who had given him a rather grandiose prospectus founded on his bumps, and this, Aunt Polly sometimes thought, had had an unsettling effect upon him.

In these days, and even later, phrenology was considered a science at least as far advanced as gynecology and it was common practice to consult the oracles. Once I was taken to Professor Cavanagh, a phrenologist and given a reading, which was rather vague. Even at that early age I had an idea that I would like to write so I asked him if I had any visible qualifications for becoming a newspaper man. He thought not, but said that it was plain enough that if I wished to enter the journalistic field, it would be better if I attached myself to some monthly publication. A quarterly, he thought, might be best adapted to my faculties. He meant nothing more than that I was obviously lazy and would take an unnecessarily long time in getting round to do anything.

Uncle John's manners were courtly, and what success the grocery store had, owed much to the suavity with which he greeted customers, literally bowing and scraping and rubbing his hands as he waited on them. There was nothing of the sycophant in him, for he was a fiery little particle, standing in no awe of size or authority. He blustered somewhat, but a kinder man never lived. At bottom he was weak and leaned much on the quiet, almost demure, strength of Aunt Polly⁴ who was the real backbone of the business.

It was she, not Uncle John, who took on the unpleasant duty of lying in wait for a customer considerably in default, and telling him in low tones, and using words that took the flesh from his bones, that he was a drunken scoundrel, and had obviously planned to bring his family to disgrace and the store to bankruptcy. Oddly enough such outrageous charges never seemed to be resented and Aunt Polly could be depended upon to see that a growing debt was brought within bounds. I have turned white and shuddered when I have seen this little woman, in a voice not raised much beyond a whisper, talking to some hulking man in a way which to me seemed to place her life in

² The Rt. Hon. Sir Thomas White, the late R. J. Fleming, the late Joseph E. Thompson and the late George H. Wolfe.

³ Uncle John Verner was born in 1832 in Northern Ireland. He married Polly Noble in 1854 when she was just 17.

⁴ Polly was born in 1837 on a farm on the old coach road between Dromore, Co. Tyrone and Enniskillen. Her family left Ireland on May 14 1847 on the *Sesostris*, a three-masted, 506-tonne sailing ship with 428 people on board. After three years in Montreal they arrived in Toronto in 1850, a city that was lit by barely 100 gaslights. Her mother was Jane Caldwell (spelt Caldwell in Ireland). Her step-father was William Fleming. She was married from their home at 6 St. David Street in Cabbagetown.

jeopardy. But there was no temper behind what she said. It would be forgotten a moment later. More than once when I was the victim of some of these searing, truthful remarks it would take me some time to get over the experience. "What's the matter with you?" Aunt Polly would ask, and when I would tell her that I was still smarting and writhing she would burst into the heartiest laugh. "Why," she would say, wiping the tears from her eyes, "that's all over with long ago."

When dealing with customers who had fallen in arrears Uncle John would bluster and mumble, and wind up by extending more credit and parting on the friendliest terms. He and Aunt Polly used often to argue about the solvency of a customer. Uncle John always took the most optimistic view of it, and used sometimes to fly into a little rage when Aunt Polly insisted that the next order must be accompanied by cash. He never liked to offend anybody. Aunt Polly literally had no thought as to whom she offended. All she wanted was what was right. If people took offence at that, it was her opinion that there was something the matter with them.

But it was her business sagacity and her genius for saving that kept the little store floating long after the time when it seemed doomed. Yet at a time when the total profit for the week would probably not be more than \$10 she would go down town and buy a gay bonnet for \$50. Nobody, least of all Uncle John, would have the courage to remonstrate. Nobody ever opposed or contradicted Aunt Polly once she had taken a stand. Speaking of the bonnet she would remark complacently, "Well, when you buy a good thing then you have it." She never bought a cheap thing nor did a cheap thing in all her long, courageous life.

I have noticed that there are just two occupations into which people will venture without any previous experience. One of them is the insurance business. There is hardly anybody who cannot make a fair start in it. He can insure himself and his immediate family, and then his intimate friends. Then he can go into some other business and usually does. The other is the grocery business. It is taken for granted that to become a butcher one needs some sort of preparation or talent, even if it is no more pertinent than a love of animals. But anybody can become a grocer. All that is required is a shop and perhaps \$500 credit.

That, I suppose, is the way Uncle John became a grocer. Before this he had been a tailor, and later obtained a job in the Custom House⁵, as a result, as he firmly believed, of the personal intervention of Sir John A. Macdonald. I never asked him why he left this secure position to embark on the more hazardous course of competitive business. But maybe the conviction that at least a grocer would never starve had something to do with it.

This must have been a consideration with our family over a period of years before the second generation had become wage earners. Uncle John and Aunt Polly were childless. With Uncle John's relatives, who were numerous and generally thriving, we in

⁵ At one time Uncle John Verner was one of about a dozen landing-waiters at the Custom House.

the store had little to do. Aunt Polly had two brothers and three sisters⁶. The sisters died and two of their husbands remarried. The wives of the brothers died and the husbands remarried. There were also cousins and second cousins definitely accepted as members of the clan, and from time to time one of them or more would find it expedient to live with Aunt Polly and Uncle John.

When relatives lost jobs or went bankrupt there was the little store, like a stubby tug, ready and willing to give help to larger and more imposing vessels. My brother and I lived there off and on for twenty years. My sister, who cost my mother her life when she was born, lived there until she died. Cousins came and went. At one time three arrived from Western Canada after the death of their mother, the second wife of one of my uncles, and they remained there until they married. Another cousin became an adopted daughter of Aunt Polly and Uncle John.

Not having enough money to order and pay for a full-sized house, most people in Toronto sixty years ago built their homes by installments. They would save enough to buy a lot. Then they would save enough to buy the material for three or four rooms; and then they would build what was intended to be the rear of the house. It was composed, generally, of lath and plaster, with gravel mixed in a sort of stucco effect, and this was called rough-cast. This part of the house would contain the kitchen, and perhaps two or three bedrooms. The more prosperous might run to a bathroom. Our store held its head up because we had a bathroom when the back of the house was built. The front was added later and it became the shop, with a hall and a couple of bedrooms above it.

I can recall seeing street after street of these unfinished houses, greyish white blocks, with an entrance on the side, many of which were never finished but stood like clumsy tombstones, as monuments to the unfulfilled ambitions and broken desires of the owners.

Three steps led from the shop level to the living quarters behind, entered by a door at the top of the flight. A few feet from the door was a small curtained window, where I used to sit to keep an eye on the store. Uncle John had an idea that I ought to have spent my time in the store itself, bustling about, rearranging the shelves and giving a general appearance of intelligent industry and enterprise. But I preferred to read, and in the days before we left the store for good my reading might proceed for an hour uninterrupted by the entrance of a tiresome customer.

To the south of the dining room into which the door at the top of the steps had entrance there was another room. It was our parlour, whose most imposing piece of furniture was an oil painting of Aunt Lizzie who had died some years before and whose portrait Mr. J. W. L. Forster had painted from photographs eked out by earnest and admiring descriptions, more or less accurate, provided by her relatives. It also had a melodeon. It looked out in the rear on a yard half filled with broken boxes, and almost as many prowling cats. Beyond were the stables, the driving shed and the hayloft.⁷

⁶ Aunt Polly had two brothers, Joseph Fleming and R.J. Fleming. She had three sisters who were Isabella, Rebecca and Elizabeth.

⁷ The store also had an orchard or access to one.

The down pipe from our bathroom was laid in the partition between the dining room and the parlour, and when the bowl was flushed there was a roar of rushing waters which drowned conversation, and while it lasted we all looked modestly at the floor, and pretended that nothing particularly ghastly was happening with company present. For as long as we lived in the place this unusually vigorous gushing of waters was an embarrassment to us all.

There were four or five bedrooms on the second floor, and the third floor, formerly a mere attic, had been turned into a large long bedroom on the death of my mother, when my father, my brother and sister and I went to live with Aunt Polly. Downstairs again there was a second street entrance which led up into a small vestibule with stained glass, up the same three or four steps to the house from the shop level, and through a hall into the parlour, or to the stairs to the second floor.

Our store was a small one but first class of its kind. It was small mainly because there was a grocery store in every block. We were considerably inferior in the matter of enterprise and business done to Radcliffe's at Queen Street and Parliament; but Radcliffe had the advantage of being on a corner and Queen Street was a considerable thoroughfare. We were in the middle of the block, and Uncle John was an older man than Radcliffe who had a staff of two or three clerks and kept his store extremely neat. Now and then when we would be putting price tickets on some article or other I would run down to see what Radcliffe was doing in this matter; and we were content to follow his lead. But we accepted no other leadership. I don't know whether our store was ever scouted in the same way. I never heard that it was.

Our store was first class in that it must have had a reputation for honesty. Nobody who knew Uncle John or Aunt Polly would believe that either of them would ever stoop to underhand methods, even against the fiercest competition. I cannot say whether adulteration and substitution were features of the grocery business in those days. They were not features of our business. The articles we handled were good, and the prices so reasonable that eventually the business failed; though the unreasonably small number of customers in the end had no doubt something to do with that.

Another contributing factor was the department stores, with their cut rates, and their "loss leaders"; staples which were sold at cost in the hope that customers entering the store would buy something else, which would make up the profit. Events suggest that the supposition was well founded. At least the department stores seem to have kept on flourishing. But there are plenty of small grocery stores too, and I suppose that they owe their continued existence to the same causes that permitted us to survive in business for more than thirty years.

Our store, and the similar stores of the period and today, had one advantage over their big competitors. They had one thing to offer customers which was elsewhere denied them. They gave credit. I doubt if we averaged three dollars a day in cash sales. Somebody passing might see something in the window that attracted him. Or, he might

have thought of something that he had forgotten, and would come in and buy it and walk away and we would never see him again.

Our regular customers were wage earners almost without exception. We had little or no professional or carriage trade. I have no idea, of course, what the average earnings of our customers would be, but I would not set it at more than \$10 a week; but even sixty years ago there survived a popular slogan "A dollar a day is very good pay," and few of our customers were conscious of poverty. They lived plainly. They had all they wanted to eat. They had a roof to cover them; their children were going to school or were already at work, and on Saturday night they could relax with a can of beer. On Wednesday nights they could go to prayer meeting and to church on Sunday. I doubt if half a dozen of them ever saw the inside of a theatre. On Saturday afternoon in summer they might go fishing in Ashbridge's Bay or see a ball game or a lacrosse match in Rosedale. That would represent about the sum of their relaxations and cultural ambitions. They would work from ten to twelve hours a day.

They were paid on Saturday and on Saturday night the family would turn up at the store to pay last week's bill, or to present plausible reasons for not paying it, and order the supply of groceries for the coming week. They did not pay last week's bill nor for the goods they were ordering. They felt there ought to be moderation in all things. So they were nearly all at least a week in debt to the store, On Thursday, as likely as not, they would want some more groceries. Then on Wednesday the head of the family would drop in for a plug of smoking or chewing tobacco. We did not sell cigarettes, chiefly because Uncle John and Aunt Polly thought they caused consumption, and they would as soon have handled narcotics.

Nothing was commoner than for a customer to call about the middle of the week and borrow a quarter. I do not remember ever having advanced more than a half dollar and I am sure none of them would have risked asking for a dollar. These loans were set down in our books as "Cash" and were added to the bill to be presented next Saturday. I have no idea what the cash was wanted for unless it might be for beer. Our customer's lived and worked mostly in the neighbourhood and did not use the street cars much; but I suppose that even in the life of the humble working man, who lives from hand to mouth and who never had a bank account in his life, there might be circumstances in which he would he would feel happier with a quarter of a dollar in his pocket. Our store was ready to come to his aid, something Eaton's would not have thought of for a moment.

But what the breath of life to the small stores became, all too often, their death rattle. Credit made them and credit destroyed them. There was generally nobody in particular to blame. There was just the poverty that stalked most of the small stores' customers from the cradle to the grave.

A man lost his job, and in two weeks was penniless. It was then that the small store did for him what no big store would do. It came to his rescue. It tided him over.

In our own store it would be unheard of to stop a man's credit just because he was out of work. That was the very time when he needed what help a little store could give him; and, if he could make arrangements for his milk and his meat, he could get everything else he required. So far as rent was concerned, it did not greatly distress him. He would not be evicted for falling a month or two behind. I never heard of anybody who had been evicted in those days. Some of our customers, of course, owned their own homes; but, if they did, as likely as not they had a little money put by and the temporary loss of employment did not spell disaster for them. A man might fall ill and be unable to work. Again our store would come to the rescue. It was not that illness was expensive at the moment. The sick man could get credit at the little drug store; the doctor did not expect to be paid for months, if indeed ever.

From whatever cause a customer lost his job, whether it was a temporary period of unemployment, or whether he had to hunt another job, he could count on his little neighbourhood store to stand at his shoulder. Sometimes there would be a daughter or a son at work and the customer could carry on as usual; but as a rule when he stopped earning he stopped paying, just as the blood stops flowing when the heart stops beating.

Then when he got on his feet again and was put back on a payroll he would come into the store some Saturday evening accompanied by his wife and, perhaps a small family, and mumble something about his bill. He would ask that it be made up. Then it would be presented to him, and he would say that he would pay perhaps \$5 on account. He would then order groceries to the amount, say, of \$3.75 and they would be put on a bill. So his account would be reduced by \$1.25, and he would depart feeling virtuous. Now when a man earning \$8 or \$10 a week goes in debt to the extent of \$50 or \$100 how is he to pay it? The answer is that he is not to pay it, certainly not all of it, and morally does not feel under any obligation to do so.

The customers of our store were as honest as any similar group of poor people could afford to be. If one of them owing \$100 had happened to pick up a hundred dollars in the streets, the chances are that he would have paid at least half of it to our Uncle. Lacking this windfall and still owing \$50 how could he pay it? Probably the family would not have a dollar left at the end of each week after paying current expenses. If they paid 25c. on the overdue account they might also reasonably be expected to pay something on other overdue accounts, which would be simply ridiculous. A man couldn't do it. Flesh and blood will stand only so much, and for the head of a family to reflect that he has less than a single dollar to keep him on the brink of solvency would be intolerable.

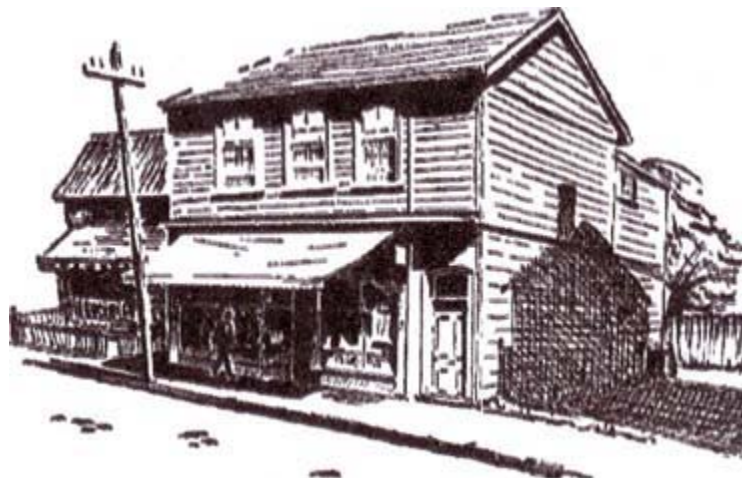
Of course there was the rare customer who had long ago been written off the books as a loss who would turn up and magnificently redeem himself thus restoring or strengthening our Aunt's faith in human nature, But generally speaking, when a customer got credit to the extent of \$50 the loss was the store's. When this happened, as it happened many times, Aunt Polly would have a long talk with the defaulter. She would satisfy herself that it was almost impossible that he would be able in any foreseeable time to wipe out the debt. So she would wipe it out. Simply to stop the

man's credit would be not only to lose the amount owing but to lose the customer as well.

You might say that a customer who did nothing but run a bill that was never paid was not the sort of customer on whom, in the aggregate, successful businesses are founded. You would be partly right. But if the customer left us he would have to go to some other store, and having no credit there would be obliged to pay cash, at least for some time.

So our general scheme was to forgive the debt, or agree to leave it in suspension, if the customer would promise to pay cash thereafter. The customer was generally willing to promise this and for a month or two he would pay cash. Then unhappily he would slip into the credit vein again, and if we were not wary would soon run up another uncollectable bill. It was not uncommon for us to have customers who had done this three or even four times. Yet we clung to them desperately for the little spurts of cash payment that intervened. What our customers did not pay fell upon the store to pay to the wholesalers, and when the time came, as come it did, that our customers were paying us less than we were paying for our supplies, the little store had come to the inevitable end of the road.

The street in front of the store was, as first I remember it, macadam, Later it was paved with cedar blocks, with gravel and tar mixed to bind them together on the surface. Most



of these blocks, in time gave way to asphalt; but many of them before they had actually been laid, were taken by the residents for firewood, A few were used in pairs, joined by a leather strap, as a support by the boys who were learning to swim in the Don river.

Above the front door was a bell attached to a spring. When the door was opened the bell would ring, and bring one of us from the living quarters in the rear.

The light was supplied by gas. So were the street lights of the period, and our local lamplighter was a young man named Bob Bowery who later became a fireman and lost his life when on duty. There was an improvement in the gaslight when a mantle device was invented, by a man named Welsbach. This consisted of a hood of asbestos set over the gas flame. It turned incandescent and gave a beautiful white light. The only objection to it was that it was extremely fragile, and could be damaged even by the match that was used to light the gas.

A trap door toward the rear of the shop led down to the cellar. Here were stored the potatoes, apples and other fruits and vegetables for which there was not floor room in

the store itself. A common price for potatoes was fifty cents a bag, and it was almost proverbial in the trade that when the potatoes were cheapest they were of the best quality. They were always cheap enough to be used as stoppers for the spouts of coal oil cans.

The store, which is still standing and is between ninety and a hundred years old, must have seen the beginning and the end of a lot of things. For example, I can remember having seen a man wearing a stock. He was an old white haired man at the time, and was greatly revered in the store to which he made occasional visits. He was all chops, jowls and wattles and his name was Mr. Buchanan. By the respect shown him I inferred that he was one of the ould sort, the real Irish gentry. When a few years later I read *Oliver Twist* I thought that Mr. Buchanan must have looked very much like Mr. Grimwig.

If you were to ask the average youth of today what a stemwinder is he probably would be at a loss. But I recall a time before the stem winder watch was invented, or at least before it appeared in Cabbagetown. All watches of the period were wound with a small key inserted in the back of the watch, and generally attached to the watch chain. I am of the generation that could understand clearly the Sherlock Holmes story in which the detective deduced so much of the character of the relative who had left his watch to Dr. Watson. If the watch had been a stemwinder Holmes would have been baffled.

And as a boy the first boots I remember came from what the English call a "bespoke" shoemaker, that is, they were made to measure. The mass production of boots had not come into existence though it did very shortly afterward. Nowadays the average citizen would no more think of having a pair of shoes made to order than he would think of having a hat made to suit the special bumps on his head.