

# ROCKWEEDING

E. W. NICHOLS

AT any time in the spring or autumn, one may go rockweeding. The exact nature of rockweed is not here to be discriminated from that of other seaweed. Erudite persons have before now been heard arguing with farmers to the effect that the name "rockweed" is incorrect, and should be abandoned—thereby showing a vast ignorance of the nature and growth of language. It is called rockweed, and therefore it is rockweed; for the same excellent reason that an apple is an apple. And it grows around the shore, on the rocks that are covered at high water and bare at low tide. Long and heavy it grows on these rocks, and it may be some favourite herb of the old man of the sea. For the natives of The Old Farm, it is a useful substance to be put in the pigyard; and for the pigs it is a thing of pure delight, a joyous occasion for holiday, to be received with happy squeals and sniffs of joy, as they run, leap, and toss the cold, dank strings about with vigorous corpulence in merry play.

There comes an evening in October when the master of The Old Farm announces that someone shall go for a load of rockweed on the following day. So the big waggon must be prepared the night before. The axles are properly greased with a yellowish substance from the box on the shelf in The Old House; or if that is empty, a mixture of lard with a little—not too much—kerosene will do. And the sideboards are tied upon the rungs of the waggon. Then we are ready for morning.

Morning comes, a warmish October morning, inclining somewhat towards rain, though still with possibilities of clearing. It is decreed that Zeb, the hired man, shall lead the expedition, and one of the boys may accompany him. A little before five o'clock, Zeb feeds the oxen. They are working fairly steadily now, and they begin their day with a couple of quarts each of cornmeal, any green stuff that happens to be at hand for them, and a morsel of hay if they want it. They sniff the meal joyously, and nuzzle their snouts into it with epicurean satisfaction. After they have eaten, they are carefully carded and combed; for Zeb is a bit of an artist as regards his team, and would not appear upon the road with them in a shaggy or unkempt condition. Their horns must be white, and tipped with brass knobs. The yoke must be neatly painted, and the straps smooth, clear, and well oiled. Zeb

himself is not so precise about his own grooming. But every good teamster cares first for his team.

The team gets away in the gray dawn of the October morning. Men and oxen are ready for the easy walk to the shore. We take the crossroad—a public road—instead of cutting through our neighbour's private way. That would imply opening and shutting several pairs of bars. The road is for some distance of slaty soil, and not very hard. But the ruts are not deep as yet. Later in the fall, and in the spring before road-making time, they will be disgraceful;—in places, a sea of mud. But now they are comfortable for travel, and the waggon rolls smoothly along, to the music of the bells, and the hum of Zeb's gentle conversation.

For Zeb is always quiet, and seldom still. He speaks with gravity and solemnity. His adventures have not been commonplace in his eyes, and he relates them in full confidence that his auditors will be enthralled with astonishment. He smiles seldom, and puffs his pipe with philosophical calm—an occasional clear command to the oxen, when his voice rings like a bell, for he is a great man with cattle—and he relapses into his conversational monotone. Zeb refused to learn to read and write, regarding his own experiences even at an early age as far more interesting than anything that could be written in books; and those who listen to him can sometimes excuse his preference. A tall man he is, and spare; a hatchet face; straight, wiry, black hair, and a black felt hat of no shape or limit. His principal rewards for living are conversation and tobacco. Often he works around all day with a neighbour, for a plug of black jack and his meals and the opportunity to talk. But now he is on regular wages, since The Old Farm distrusts the principle of taking something for nothing, as being in the long run unsound economy.

When the crossroad is passed, we turn left, and are on the down grade for a mile or so that takes us to the shore. Then we turn again before we get to the big railroad bridge, and cross into a private road through the field along the shore until we reach the point at which we descend upon the actual beach. The oxen move steadily and smoothly. The sound of the bells is a placid accompaniment. Going down hill, oxen with any vice in them are likely to haul off. They spread themselves as far from the tongue as they may, and brace their feet against each other at every step; or perhaps they may crowd, each pushing as hard as he can against the tongue in the effort, it seems, to land his neighbour in the ditch. But Zeb's cattle can have no vice.

The tide is now nearly out, and the top brush of the neighbouring weir stands damp and black above the muddy water. Inside

the weir a dory is anchored, showing that some optimist expects a haul of fish. Gulls scream around in hope of an impending meal. The mist rises from the Basin, and floats lazily toward the Bay of Fundy. Evidently it will be a fine day, after all; and half a mile across tide and mudflats the town stands high and clear on its pleasant hill, beautiful for situation, with the spires showing austere against the wooded mountains behind.

Just above the road that runs to the beach, the ground slopes up where a cluster of aged cherry trees, around a grass-grown cellar, indicates the former dwelling of some early settler. On that point, old men tell us, some of the Loyalists landed; and their memories are green in the land. Down a little farther on the beach is the spot where two mature citizens, serious men, fathers of families, who wished to test each other's prowess, fought steadily and in good humour for an hour or so, then shook hands and called it a draw. Zeb knows all these things, but they interest him not at the moment. Between the upper beach, part of which is wet only at spring tides and in rain storms, and the lower mudflats which are never dry, but uncovered only for a short time at low water, lies the rockweed belt, though nobody ever calls it that. Zeb leaves the oxen standing in pleasant converse with a bundle of hay, and walks on until he finds good, thick, black, long rockweed. Then he produces and solemnly whets his knife, and the work begins.

A careless cutter leaves a long stalk of rockweed on each rock, thereby reaping only half a harvest, and incurring the wrath of the next comer. But a good workman cuts close. "He shaves the rocks", is a recommendation. Zeb is not the most expert at this task; his skill is with the team. But he does sufficiently well to avoid censure. The piles of rockweed grow beside him. It would be a cold task, but the sun comes out,—grateful to men and beasts. For the water that lately washed the weed came in from the Bay of Fundy, and there is no colder substance unfrozen on earth.

As the sun gets warm, Zeb's conversation flows on stimulated. In his stories he knows not the concept truth. But there is no malice, and no desire for display. He lies with pure zeal for romance, as do other artists. "You think the wind blew the other night? Well, it did. But you should have seen the cyclone in Dakoto"—so he calls the State in which, led by vagrant impulse and urged by creditors, he once spent a year. "One day we all went into the cyclone cellar. When the wind stopped and we went up, nothing seemed to be touched, but between the house and barn was a great pile of stones. We went and looked, and there were all the

stones out of the well. It was a narrow cyclone, missed the house and barn, and struck the well and turned it inside out. Yes, sir." And Zeb ruminates for a little, his eye kindling with honest pride in the presence of this masterpiece.

The road up the beach to the shore is not steep, but very heavy, trackless, to be chosen anew by every driver after every tide. So it is necessary to make two trips ashore to get enough for a load home. Zeb leaves his companion to cut in solitude, and brings up the team. His knife, meanwhile, is placed with his coat upon a high rock, plainly visible. Knives sometimes cut, and men who wear long boots thrust their knives, handle downward, into a boot. If the blade be long, it may project above the boot; and in the excitement of pitching the heavy weed, once or twice in history some man has cut his hand. So Zeb takes precautions, solemnly throws a light load into the waggon, and drives it to land where he deposits it in a convenient place beside the road. Then he brings the team back, and resumes his cutting. Now and again some strange venture happened by land or sea rises to the surface of his mind, and is related with the severity of conscious rectitude and unfailing composure of countenance.

And now all is ready for the second and last load from the beach. The oxen climb surely over the rocks, and the waggon thuds heavily behind them. Care must be exercised to avoid the larger rocks, but no one can dodge them all and get the desired load. And when it is all aboard, care is needed in driving up the shore; for in places the gravel lies thin over a lower stratum of clay, that makes very hard hauling. Zeb knows his beach, however, and would scorn to land himself in any such accident. The team arrives safely beside the load previously deposited. This is thrown on, the whole tramped in securely around the top, and the journey homeward begins.

In crowded cities, where there is often no room to spare, the teamster ordinarily rides on his load and economizes space. But in this road there is abundance of space, bounded only by the sea and the bush, and it is an unwritten law that a good teamster should walk beside his loaded team. There are exceptions, especially when the load is of grain or hay, or the teamster is old or lame; but the habit is so deep-seated that many men walk with the oxen even when they are travelling light. Zeb produces apples from his capacious pockets, and shares them with his companion. They munch steadily, and converse on mundane topics; for Zeb's vein of romance has been exhausted for the time. The bells tinkle with a steady soft music as the oxen plod firmly on. The road is

uphill all the way from the beach until the crossroad is reached. In seasons of stress, one man would be expected to walk on home and leave the other to follow with the team; but to-day there is no great hurry. As the team mounts the rising ground that leads toward the public road, one looks back and sees the long waste of flats with their fish weirs standing out like tall, slim, brush fences—as, for the fish, they are—and the receding tide, now at its lowest point. Miles across the Basin lies the Granville shore, looking, in the distance, about as it must have looked to DeMonts, save for one bare scar on its side caused by the landslide a century ago; the steep and dark North Mountain, with its outlines softened in the October sunlight; and the abrupt break in the wall that leads to the Bay of Fundy and the eternal sea beyond. On a dull gray day, with a sea of sullen glass, the New Brunswick coast looms threatening across the Bay; but to-day the weather is fine after all, and the fog outside prevents the farther view. Shortly will come a shiver in the air, a faint chill wind from the sea, “wind, wind of the deep sea” as Euripides has it, and then all men know that the tide has turned, and will shortly be out of the channel and racing back across the flats, to climb more slowly to its appointed mark on the beach.

There is a slow haul up the long grade from the shore to the crossroad. Over in the field beside the road, a man is digging potatoes—late, for that part of the country; and another gathers winter apples from some gnarled old trees. Soon the team gets up far enough to permit a view over the flats, toward which the tide is now climbing. For the incoming tide has three movements; a slow climb up the banks of the channel, a swift race over the almost level mud, and a steady and sedate progress up through the rockweed and so on to high water mark. Beyond in the Basin a sail or two may be seen, and the water sparkles joyously in the sun.

Now we have passed out of sight of the sea, and are climbing steadily up the long grade through fields filled with bushes—second growth scrub. Suddenly the oxen quicken their steps and haw sharply, but they are checked by Zeb’s swift command. The little brook lies just ahead, crossed by a bridge of poles and earth; but on one side there is a road worn through it, whereby cattle may drink. It would be unwise to drive in, for that would mean hauling the load up the steep, rough bank. So Zeb chocks the wheel, takes the oxen off the tongue, and lets them rush into the brook and drink what they like. It is a dangerous thing to do with hot and laden horses. A horse will stand nineteen swallows

of water at any time, if it is not too cold; that means, roughly, one pailful. But the oxen are not hot, the day is pleasant, and water never hurts cattle anyhow. There is a grove of spruces above in the pasture, and a squirrel curses heartily at the noisy, big animals—men and oxen—who come too near to his haunts; but his cursing is good-natured, and reverberates pleasantly in the crisp air. Then the oxen come out of the water in full content, and step lazily across the tongue and into their places. Zeb lifts the iron shod end of the tongue with his foot, catches it from above the yoke with his left hand, bends the heads of his team suddenly down, shoots the dutch bolt home, and we are off again. A surprisingly simple manoeuvre, but let a novice attempt it! Great are the mysteries of teaming; and Zeb is their prophet.

As we toil on upwards, there comes a swift whir of wings from the wild apple tree in the brush. "Partridge", we say, and wonder whether anyone has any snares hereabouts. Snaring is probably illegal, but it is hard to teach boys that the town fellow has a right to shoot game on our farm and that we may not take for our own consumption as we please.

The mists of the morning have all been burned away, and the oxen begin to puff a little as they get toward the end of the long grade. We pass for a little between two cultivated fields,—one, a back field belonging to a neighbour of The Old Farm; the other, once someone's home field, now merely a bit of pasture. The old cellar stands in melancholy solitude, while a brindled yearling strolls importantly around it; and nearby a rude quadrangle of flat stones shows the remains of the foundation where once the barn stood. We are on higher ground now, and can look across the woods into the Basin again, and the houses of Granville show up against the mountain beyond. Just in sight across the top of the mountain is a wall of fog, and one realizes the truth of at least one line of *Evangeline*.

As we go around the corner of the crossroad, Zeb recalls the mystery of the shot fired there at the butcher. This butcher was riding home from the bank, with his pockets full of money. He intended to go out into the country buying cattle next day. Someone fired at him from ambush here, and the shot went low,—into the thick cushion on which he sat. There was a mystery about it. To the public the money furnished a plausible reason, but the butcher himself suspected a private enemy. "Most likely he knew his own business best", says Zeb.

We meet few teams on our journey. "Team" here means any sort of conveyance drawn by horses or cattle, or any pair of

horses or cattle without conveyance. One or two farmers we see passing us on their way home from town. There is a casual question about the length of the rockweed, and a casual remark about the state of the weather. But on the crossroad approaches a span drawing an ornate buckboard filled with belated tourists. They seldom stay so late, though in the season the little town is filled with them. "Summer folks", says Zeb, "time they got back to Boston." For Boston stands to the conservative rural mind as the United States, with New York as an important suburb. The most ardent advocate of Back Bay and Brookline could not ask to see his metropolis further exalted. Zeb knows better, for he has been west; and everybody in the neighborhood above the age of fifteen has been to the States at least once. But in this matter Zeb follows the old plan of thinking with the learned and speaking with the vulgar.

Now we are passing the Larsen field, and turning into the Back Road near The Old Farm. The oxen look up to the left where stands the gate which admits them into their pasture, but think better of it, even without Zeb's admonitory "Gee". They know that they couldn't carry their load with them. The eastern end of the house shows clean and fair above the cherry trees in its spotless coat of white paint. The fields are now steeped in soft October sunshine, and the maple grove beyond brave in its autumn coat of gorgeous colour. We cross another of those earth-covered pole bridges, and climb a diminutive, slaty hill, pass the old, black cherry trees, and turn in at the gate. The oxen are almost trotting now. They smell the barn beyond, and they know that their labours are at an end. Zeb watches their progress around the corner of the house with practised eye. Once, a too ardent team struck the cornerboard with their off wheel, a circumstance not pleasing to the master of the Old Farm, nor comfortable to the delinquent teamster. Zeb drives on, and brings his team to a halt when the waggon stands squarely against the pigyard. Plenty of time to unload before dinner! So the oxen are taken off to the big barn, where they stand in huge content over their dinners, shortly to lie on clean dry rushes and dream on indefinitely until Zeb or hunger brings them to their feet. Zeb climbs upon the rockweed. The master himself appears to take a hand. And the two pigs race around the yard in transports of enthusiasm. They grunt and squeal and leap with ponderous though rapid glee. The waggon is emptied swiftly. A call for dinner comes from the house, and Zeb strides solemnly toward the door to perform that preliminary to a serious pipe.