

JOE THE BOOK FARMER MAKING GOOD ON THE LAND

By GARRARD HARRIS

SYNOPSIS

Joe Weston, fourteen years old, decides to make a success of his father's run-down farm. He reads the latest scientific books. Mr. Somerville, a merchant, agrees to help him.

Joe's father is pessimistic. He sneers at book farming and book farmers. Mr. Somerville, struck with Joe's business ability and ambition, backs him in prize competitions.

Passerby on the road liner to watch Joe operate. The sneers that were in evidence at first soon give way to looks of surprise. Joe is showing them something as a farmer.

Joe's father's pessimism gradually fades away. He watches Joe work. He sees him perform wonders with the soil. He soon is as enthusiastic as Joe. His conversion pleases Mr. Somerville.

Joe's corn is the wonder of the country. With money he received from a commission merchant for his product he starts a bank account, which he proudly exhibits to his father.

There is a constant demand for the corn Joe is raising. He receives from a commission merchant for his product at a cost of \$12.20.

It is announced that Joe Weston, the book farmer, won the first corn prize for the county. His father says, "Son, I'm powerful proud of ye."

CHAPTER XI

Joe's Father Studies.

Joe went ahead with his preparations on his own acre, the same land that he had used the last year. He had sowed it down in rye as a winter cover crop and to prevent washing of the soil and at the same time to afford a winter pasture for the stock and pigs. The rye was to be turned under when the ground was first broken in the spring. Mr. Weston had planted six acres in oats, but proposed to let them mature after having been grazed by the stock during the winter.

In his spare time Joe now hauled leaves; but, since there was stock on the place, the leaves were not applied direct to the land. The cows and horses were bedded in the leaves, and a covered pen was built back of the barn into which the leaves and bedding from the stalls were thrown each day.

"Ain't no use in buildin' a fertilizer pen, Joe," objected his father when the subject was first mentioned. "Just pitch it out there under the eaves, an' the rain and water 'll help rot it."

"Yes, and over half its value will be running off in waste water toward the creek," said Joe. "The water will take most of the ammonia and a heap of the nitrogen and phosphoric acid and such out of it. No; it's kept it dry until we are ready to apply it; then it will not lose its strength. There's a government bulletin on the care of barnyard fertilizer. Haven't you read it?"

"No; I ain't had time yet. I've got so much to learn an' so much to read. An' you know readin' is mighty hard work for me. I ain't had as much schoolin' in all my life as you've had a ready."

Joe felt sorry for his father, who seemed so keenly conscious of late regarding his own limitations. Joe sought to make him feel easier.

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talk about it as we go along. "That's just a fine idea!" "We'll start out that pile tonight and make a sort of."

Accordingly after supper Joe and his father went through the armful of government bulletins and picked out about a dozen to form their course of study until summer. After they had looked the one on barnyard fertilizers they took two evenings to review and discuss it.

"Tell you what, Joe," said Mr. Weston the second evening, "that there bulletin has given me lots of ideas. Now, we all know one of the biggest expenses in farmin' right is this here commercial fertilizer. Seems to me if we could find somethin' to take its place we could save a whole lot."

"That's just the thing we want to do—instead of paying the fertilizer factories for it, do our own manufacturing."

"Sure, an' make the profit ourselves. You know and I know the commercial fertilizer is gone in a year. Maybe a little of the phosphate stays in the soil for the next year, but not enough to do any good. Got to buy again next year."

"That's so."

"Now, I see by this here bulletin we've just read that an experiment showed that seven years after a piece of soil was treated with barnyard fertilizer it showed effects of the stuff as against a piece of the same land treated with commercial fertilizer. That showed no trace hardly after the second year."

"Looks like the thing to do is to figure the way to get more barnyard stuff and build the land up so it will stay built," commented Joe.

"That's just what I mean, son. Stop the outgo for the commercial chemical stuff."

"How are we going to do it?" "It's goin' to be slow work. In the first place, we've got to have more cattle an' we've got practically no money now."

"But we can do this: Winter in on, an' folks will sell cattle cheap rather than feed 'em. We ought to be able to pick up a dozen or so half starved little calves for next to nothing. We can get credit at the bank for a hundred dollars, an' I think we better put it in calves."

"Says observed Joe, "that's a perfectly fine scheme. I know where I can buy two five-months-old calves now for \$2 apiece."

"An' I'll start tomorrow to bust up six or seven acres more an' put in more oats. It's late, I know, but they will make all right. That will give winter grazing and stuff to feed on an' straw to bed 'em in an' turn under."

"We can pull them calves through without much cost until grass comes out; then next summer put every foot of ground we can in pea vine hay."

"Peas are fine for the land—collect nitrogen from the air and store it on the roots in those little bumps—'nodules' the book calls them," said Joe.

"Then the leaves that fall from the pea vines help put humus in the land along with the decaying roots."

"Besides the oats and pea vine hay and fodder we will be well fixed to take a big herd of cattle through next winter, and what nubbins corn we raise," said Mr. Weston. "We'll keep the cattle up at night, bod 'em in leaves an' straw, compost it, and we've got a good start on fertilizer. In two years more we ought to have those calves in prime fix for beef cattle and get \$50 apiece for 'em."

"That looks mighty fine," assented Joe. "Besides the oats being grazed by the cattle will help the soil, and the land will get the benefit of what fertilizer is dropped there then, and that will amount to a heap."

"Then," continued Mr. Weston, "I figure that this next fall, instead of selling our cotton seed, we ought to swap it to the oil mill for cottonseed meal and hulls. There's a heap of fatening stuff in the meal, and it forms about a fourth of these commercial fertilizers and furnishes nitrogen. Mix the meal and hulls and feed it to our cattle. We get the benefit of the fatening of the beoves an' then have the rest of it with the nitrogen in it for the land."

"Say, you were late getting started, but you sure are farming like an old to date farmer now!" enthused Joe.

"Tryin' to make up for lost time, son. We'll have somethin' yet, you an' I. Well, as I was sayin', in this scheme we practically get our beef cattle for nothing, get the benefit of permanent fertilizer on the land and ought to make a profit of 50 or 75 per cent on each animal."

"It looks good," judicially admitted Joe.

"It is good, and it's horse sense too. Why, if we just broke even on handling the cattle it would pay us, for the good we will get in fertilizer for the land and to stop the outgo for chemical stuff each year. But we'll make money on 'em, big money."

"If we keep planting peas and filling the ground with the roots full of nitrogen and planting cover crops in winter and grazing it and turning under stubble and putting rotted leaves and straw and cornstalks and stable cleanings mixed in this land in five years we'll have the richest place in the county," continued Mr. Weston.

"Well, I'm going to go hunting for scrubby half starved calves," said Joe. "I'll ask all the boys at school if they have any to sell for cash, and you go and get the money from the bank."

"All right, and first thing we know we'll have a fertilizer factory here that will be paying us biggest sort of profits," said Mr. Weston.

Joe was on his way to school a few days later when he saw a boy about his own age approaching him on a nice bay pony. The boy was evidently a city youth, and seeing Joe, he reined up.

"Hello!" he remarked, in a friendly tone. He was a nice, manly looking boy, but very thin and pale.

"Hello, yourself?" answered Joe, stopping and sizing him up. Joe liked his looks, but thought he was remarkably puny in appearance.

"You're Joe Weston, the champion corn grower, aren't you?" he said. Joe nodded. "I saw your picture in the papers, but I thought you were a heap bigger than you are. I've wanted to meet you."

"Much obliged," said Joe. "Who are you?" "Excuse me for not telling. I'm Tom Ralston. Father bought that big old

plantation of Major Dean's down the road about two miles. We've only been here a couple of weeks."

"Where you from?" "Up north. I'm just over a spell of typhoid and awfully weak. Then mother not strong, and we wanted to get away from the hard winters up there, so father bought this old house and plantation for a winter home. He can't stay here all the time, but he will come down and hunt and fish whenever he can get off. He's about worn himself out working. Owns a big factory."

"Well, I'm glad you all have moved in the neighborhood, and hope you'll like it. Ever lived in the country before?"

"Never have, but I think it's fine, what I have seen of it!" said Tom, with enthusiasm.

"Come over and see me some time. It's easier for you to come to see me than for me to go to your house; you've got a pony, and I have to hoof it or ride one of the work horses."

"Sure will, and thank you for asking me. It's kind of lonely until one gets acquainted. How far you going to ride?" "About a mile, to the schoolhouse."

"Hop up behind me, and I'll give you a lift. This pony rides as easy as a rocking chair rocks. Come on!" He extended his hand. Joe placed one foot in the stirrup and vaulted up behind him. The pony was indeed a fine one. By the time they reached the schoolhouse the two boys were well started on a friendship. Several of the boys at the school crowded about as they rode up.

"Say, fellows!" called Joe. "This is Tom Ralston. His folks bought the old Dean place and just moved in. He's been mighty sick with fever an' ain't strong yet, but he wants to get acquainted. When you get a chance go over and see him."

"Wish you would," added Tom. "Some of the gang will be over Saturday, sure," announced Reddy Hayward. "Pleased to meet you. Won't you 'light an' rest your saddle?" Reddy was doing the elegant as host for the school.

"No; much obliged. Got to go to town and do some errands for mother, but I'll come over once in awhile at recess and see you fellows. Glad to have met you, and so long!" He waved a farewell, and the pony sped down the road.

The boys talked him over and decided he "would do." Several expressed the opinion that he looked sort of "sissy" and feeble.

"If you'd been in bed nine weeks with typhoid you'd look just as bad," retorted Joe. "An' if I hear of anybody imposing on him until he gets strong enough to take care of himself I've got me to whip. He's a decent thing for us all to act like gentlemen an' make him welcome to our neighborhood like we'd appreciate his doing if we moved up in the neck of the woods where he comes from."

"Joe's right!" exclaimed Reddy Hayward. "When these two leaders of the school agreed on a matter it was settled in so far as that crowd of boys was concerned."

In two weeks Tom had got strong enough to stand considerable exercise. He rode the daily horseback rides and felt fresh, vigorously air of the country. He was very much possessed with the idea of going on a possum hunt.

"I can fix that all right," assured Joe. "I'll see old Uncle Jeff Johnson—that old dork who lives up the road; he'll take us. He's got some good possum dogs. I'll tell him to come and see you when the time is right, and we'll go. Old Uncle Rube that works here on this place of yours is a good hunter too."

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here, got to speculating in cotton and made a whole lot of money. He undertook to put on a great deal of style then—had his house fixed over and moved to New Orleans and got a French chef, and the first entertainment was a big possum supper to a lot of his cronies from New Orleans. You just ought to hear the colonel tell about it.

"That Frenchman didn't know how to cook possums, and he brought them in roasted and swimming in cream gravy with a lot of chopped vegetables all over 'em, in a something or other."

"The colonel called him to the dining room and asked him about it. Then the colonel got so mad at his dinner being ruined he grabbed a big fat possum by the hind legs from the dish and slammed the chef over the head with it and ran him down the front steps trying to hit him again."

"The colonel said he agreed to pay that chef a hundred dollars a month, but he wouldn't do it and soon to 'right wasn't worth two bits a year. He sent the chef back on the next boat and sent for Aunt Venus, Uncle Jeff's wife, and she cooked the possums next day."

Uncle Jeff stood chuckling. "I was dar. Yo' jes' oughter seed dat Frenchy bounce down dem steps. Dat wuz fat, an' de colonel he wuz fat too. Wuz dat possum all smothered over wif cream gravy? He wuz de maddest wite man I ever seed. De guests ain't quit luffin twell yit, I reckon. Hit shore wuz funny!"

"All right, have your way about the front, Uncle Jeff," conceded Tom. "Only I want to help catch a possum and eat it if it is cooked right."

"Not that's de way ter talk. Yo' leas' de humb'ler de man I see. Uncle Rube, an' de cookin' ter Mis' Venus, an' all we axes yo' boys is ter furnish de appetites on 'our founder yo'se'fs."

"We can furnish the appetites all right," assured Joe. "Well, right after supper 'em all put on yo' ole clo'es, an' me an' Rube'll git de dawgs an' de res' de fixin's."

"Dawgs an' supper, and about half past 7 Uncle Jeff sounded his horn as he came up the front drive, accompanied by four yelling dogs. Uncle Rube came from the rear of the house carrying in one hand a light, sharp ax and a lantern in the other. Slung across his back and that of Uncle Jeff were bundles of very rich "fat" pine cut in splinters about the size of a finger and about four feet long. Each carried an empty sack wrapped around the cord that held the pine splinters.

"What are those pine sticks for?" inquired Tom. "Torches," answered Joe, who was an old hand at the game. "Take four or five of those long splinters, hold them together in your hand and light the other end and it makes the best sort of a light—harder the wind blows the brighter it gets."

"Inquired Uncle Jeff, "Go on, Uncle Rube?" "I spec we stand a better chance over in dat big ole fiel' by de creek. Deys's some simonones tho' on de trees yit down dar. I come tho' dar yesterday and seed war possums been feedin'. Den deys's plenty black haws down in de bottoms on choky berries in red haws too. Deys's plenty er feed, an' I need barnyard stuff mightly."

"All right, lead on, let's be going somewhere," said Joe, with impatience. Uncle Jeff sounded his horn. The dogs leaped joyfully with frantic yelps and sprang ahead.

The party cut through the stable lot, down through the lower pasture and up the long slope of the hill where the old field lay on the other side. They walked single file into the mysterious night. Rube with the lantern leading, then the boys, and Uncle Jeff bringing up the rear. As they reached the crest of the hill they stood still a few moments while the dogs rang in front of them. Directly one of the dogs broke into cry, joined by the others shortly.

"Uh, huh! Hear dat! Done struck er Rube ready!" exclaimed Uncle Jeff in triumph.

"Hot trail, too," observed Uncle Rube. "We'll git dat ole possum in er mighty few minutes."

The dogs were making the silent woods ring with their musical notes as the two men whooped encouragement. The trail led directly down the long slope and into the sweet gum flats near the creek.

"Makin' fer de swamp," said Uncle Jeff. "Climb out a piece in the trailing cry of the dogs, and the long way out notes gave place to short, excited yelps."

"Treed, by granny—treed a'yeady! Come on!" called Rube, striking a trot in the direction of the dogs and yelling encouragement to them so they would not desert the quarry and take up another trail.

Dancing about the base of a tall, slim sweet gum tree were two boys, jumping up with forefoot on the trunk and baying in a frenzy of excitement.

"Dar he—dar he!" cried Jeff in joy, peering up in the darkness. "Way up in de top. See 'em?"

Tom could merely see an indistinct blur against the starlight through the bare branches.

"I guess so. I see something!" "Climb out a piece in the trailing cry of the dogs, and the long way out notes gave place to short, excited yelps."

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We ain't let dat ole possum git away. Turn 'em loose quick, befo' he c'n git far off!"

"Well, ain't he er slick un!" commented Jeff as he finally got untangled from the cord holding the dogs, and they plunged excitedly into the brush of the treetop, scuffling and sniffing in confusion. They lost several minutes in that way, then broke into full cry, trailing up the hill, men and boys following as best they could. It was hardly five minutes after they took the trail the second time, but the party had traveled pellmell over a quarter of a mile.

"Don't tell me dat ole possum ain't been hunted befo' dis!" panted Rube. "He's a-makin' time like er deer."

The dogs signaled that they had traced again.

"Now we got 'im! I ain't gwine take no no chances—dem dawgs kin have dey fun on chaw 'im too, if dey wants. I don't suppose no possum ter make me run messef' ter death!" announced Uncle Jeff.

This time the quarry had taken to a tall blackjack about as large around as a man's leg.

"'Hole de dawgs, Uncle Jeff—hit's jes' time ter cut de tree—but I sho is hit nears de ground!"

"All right, jes' so yer don't let 'em loose an' let de tree fall on 'em. Dem's vallyble dawgs!"

Tom and Joe stood holding the torches so Uncle Jeff could see to swing the ax. Directly came the preliminary crackling and swaying.

"Ready now!" warned Uncle Jeff as he hit the final lick, and the tree majestically swayed and fell with a thunderous crash. A second before it hit earth Rube turned the dogs loose, and they were in a treetop almost before it had settled from the rebound.

Men and boys ran forward, holding their lights aloft, and puzzled, too, for there was the liveliest scrap going on in those interlaced branches and twigs they had ever witnessed. The dogs were snarling and yelping and barking and biting. There were squeals and howls and growls, and every minute or so a dog would dash out, snapping a badly torn ear or bawling into a bitter noise.

"Why, good gracious erivv, de fat ain't er gre't big ole cone!" yelled Uncle Rube. "Whoopie! Sick 'im, Spot! Sick 'im, Ratter! Sick 'im, dawgs!"

The dogs plunged back to the fray. The coon had about bested them in the thick branches, but on the second attack Br'er Coon made the fatal mistake of trying to get into the open. As he cleared the tree and landed in the grass there was another mixup of flying claws and snapping jaws.

The coon lay flat on his back and fought with all four feet and his teeth. He was holding off the dogs and inflicting more damage on them than they were on him until the dogs got down to team work and would rush him two at a time on different sides. It was as pretty a team play as ever a football game exhibited.

Spot managed to get the coon by the neck, and the last heard of him was a shrill squeal as Spot shut off his breath and proceeded to shake the life out of him.

"Mighty glad to get 'em," said his mother. "Looks to me like you've put on a few pounds lately, Joe."

"Wouldn't be surprised—at the rate I've been eatin'," chuckled Joe.

"We've been livin' pretty high ourselves since you've been running with those Yankee millionaire folks," said Mr. Weston. "Bear, deer, birds, wild turkey, squirrels—and you gettin' paid for it too!"

"Well, come to think of it, the scheme is pretty fine. But, then, pa, think of all the hard years we've had—no fun and powerful poor eatin'," suggested Joe soberly.

"That's so, and I've about come to the idee that the harder a man works the more fun he's goin' to have some time or other an' more he appreciates it when it does come."

"Sorter looks that way, don't it?" agreed Joe. "Well, we've got to get busy now. Come on, let's round up the calves and stock. I'm going to turn them in on the oats. Tomorrow I want the wagon and team. I start to hauling manure."