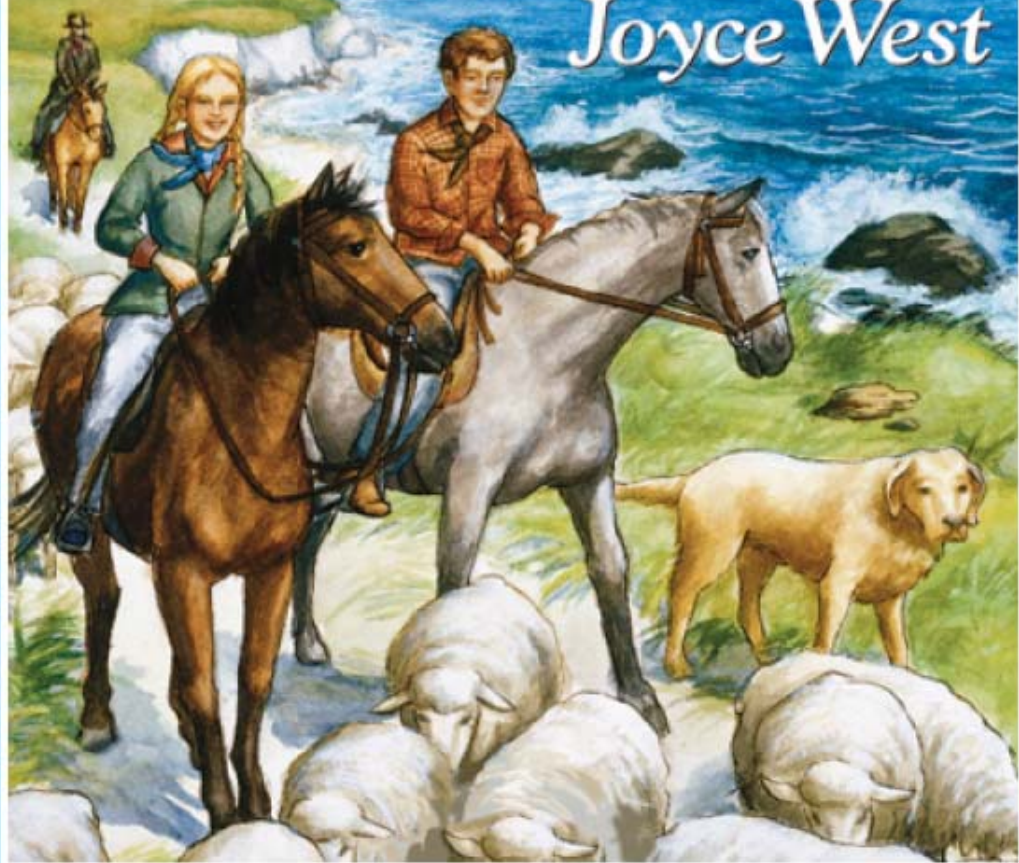


The Drovers Road

Collection
ADVENTURES in NEW ZEALAND

Joyce West



Book 2 • Cape Lost



CAPE LOST

by Joyce West

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1. Cape Lost

The road ran on, long and white and winding, into the hills. From our horses' feet the dust rose up; a haze of dust hung over the moving mob of sheep; there was a constant chorus of bleating, and the voices of the dogs were sharp.

We had left Drovers Road that morning, and we were bound for Cape Lost. We were taking the sheep by road to my Great-uncle Garnet Allan's place.

There seem to be a great number of Allans in this part of the world; I am sure it must be very confusing to people who do not know us well. At the homestead of Drovers Road, near Renny's Crossing, live our own family of Allans: my three cousins, Eve, Hugh and Merry, my young unmarried uncle Dunsany, Aunt Belle and I.

Drovers Road has been my home as long as I can remember. Eve, Hugh and Merry are the children of Dunsany's eldest brother, Hugh, who was killed with his wife in an accident. My father is the middle brother; he and my mother were divorced when I was very small, and he has lived away from New Zealand for many years. Now he is planning to buy the piece of land that lies farther up the valley, and when I am finished at boarding-school I am going to keep house for him. I mean to try to make a real home, as Drovers Road has always been.

Aunt Belle says that Great-uncle Garnet is a recluse. That means that he likes living alone and is not always going around visiting people. Sometimes I wish that some more of our relations were recluses too.

It was a very early summer morning in the first week of the holidays when we left Drovers Road. The great steep hills were gold coloured in the sunlight and the blue shadows lay low over the valley floor.

Now, by ten o'clock, there was only bush around us, and the hills and the winding curves of the old stock road. Four of us rode behind the mob: Dunsany on his young chestnut, Ted Marshall our head shepherd, slouching and graceful on his roan pony, and Merry and I, with our big hound dog Bugle trotting at our horses' heels. The pack-horses followed lazily, with lurching

loads. School seemed ten thousand miles and a hundred years away.

“Smoke-O!” Dunsany called, turning in his saddle to shout back at us.

We had come to a wide, stony stream bed, and while Merry collected dry twigs for the fire, I filled the billy from the clear, fast-running current, and piled up a rough fireplace of stones. We cut slices of Aunt Belle’s fresh home-baked bread, and put them together with a thick spread of butter and wedges of cold meat. When the water boiled we threw in a small handful of tea, and lifted the billy from the fire. The tea smelt sweetly of manuka smoke. The sheep fanned out in the clearing and the dogs lay and watched them. We sat in the shade of the tree-ferns and ate as if we had not seen food for a week.

The pack-horses carried our blankets and cooking gear. There were two of them; the big chestnut was called Paninui, which means in Maori, “big head.” He had the biggest head I ever saw on a horse; in fact he was just about as ugly as a horse could be, but he was very good-natured, and no trouble on the road. We all liked the other pack-horse, the little grey gelding. We called him Old Goat, because he had a little grey beard under his chin, and long furry ears that flickered back and forth as he ambled along under his swaying pack.

I rode my own horse, my dear Gentle Annie. Once out on the road, and away from the sound of other horses galloping, or the sight of fences to jump, she was as quiet as any good drover’s horse should be. She paced slowly behind the sheep, on a loose rein, her tail swinging lazily to keep the flies away.

Bugle had insisted upon coming with us, of course, though nobody could have called him a working dog; in fact, when you come to think of it, Bugle never worked. Dunsany made an awful fuss at first. It made his nerves bad, he said, to have to see a great big useless brute there day after day. Even if he was no good, Merry and I argued, at least he would do no harm, but I doubt if we would have been allowed to bring him if it had not been for Aunt Belle. She utterly refused, she said, to be left with Bugle moping and whining around the kitchen door all the time we were away. So Dunsany gave in, and Bugle was with us.

If Bugle had nothing to do, he was the only one. Merry and I were camp cooks; Ted Marshall looked after killing and skinning

the sheep for the dogs; Dunsany's particular job was looking after the horses and packing the loads.

It was hard work being cooks. For dinner the first night Merry and I served up a cold leg of lamb which Aunt Belle had cooked, and we boiled up a big pot of potatoes, turnips and onions. Then we had fruit cake, and a big billy of tea. Dunsany said it looked as if we might be going to get by as camp cooks.

We had a perfect place for a camp that first night, a sheltered bay in a creek bed, up against the hillside, with a stony-bottomed stream whispering by. I could hardly believe that I was really there, sleeping out in the open, only the sky above me, and my saddle for a pillow. I had thought I was sleepy enough to drop off as soon as I closed my eyes, but it was all so strange that I lay awake, watching and listening. The summer stars burned white above the rim of the hills, and there were the small mysterious sounds of the bush at night. The creek rustled over the stones, and a morepork cried in a lonely voice.

I lay and thought about Great-uncle Garnet, and about the strange story, which we had heard so often, of Great-aunt Vanessa.

Great-aunt Vanessa was supposed to be the most beautiful person in all our family. Aunt Belle went to her wedding, and she said that Great-aunt Vanessa, in a long, plain white satin dress, carrying magnolia flowers, was almost too lovely to be believed. She had dark, smooth hair and a long slim neck; she was tall and very light on her feet, and she walked so beautifully that everyone turned to look after her as she went by—like Helen, in our history lesson at school, when even the old men turned to watch her as she walked on the walls of Troy.

Great-uncle Garnet had seen her once as she walked by and had fallen in love with her, and he never rested until she was his wife. Great-aunt Vanessa must have loved him too, for on their wedding-night she took off the long golden chain which she wore about her neck, and broke it in two, and they made a compact that they would always wear the two halves, as a token, if they were separated one from the other.

Great-uncle Garnet took the broken halves to a jeweller, and had him make them into two bracelets fastening with clasps, and he placed the one on Great-aunt Vanessa's arm, and wore the other one himself. Very strange it looked too, Aunt Belle said, on his

brown, strong wrist, but anyone who knew Great-uncle Garnet knew better than to make fun of him about a thing like that.

So Great-aunt Vanessa went back with him to his lonely home, and there at Cape Lost, between the hills and the sea, they lived in happiness for more than three years.

Then something terrible happened.

Visitors very seldom came to Cape Lost. Ships called once or twice a year for the wool; mostly the nearest port of call was the lighthouse farther up the coast. But one summer night a yacht put in, storm-damaged, to the little cove on the sheltered side of the cape. She was an ocean-going yacht, a good little ship called *Wanderer*. Her owner was a young Englishman, John Gainsford, who, with his small crew, was on a world cruise.

Wanderer stayed three weeks at Cape Lost. John Gainsford and his crew lived on board, and worked at the repairs, but he came and went as a welcome visitor at the homestead. He had seen a great deal of the world and he loved to talk, and he had the gift of words. Great-aunt Vanessa listened while he told of strange blue harbours and tropical starlight, of the scent of spices and the sound of camel bells. He gave her strange shells from distant beaches and corals that had once glowed under peacock waters; he gave her a little transparent boat of a nautilus shell that is supposed to sail the island seas alone, setting its course by wind and tide.

Great-uncle Garnet found timber for the repairs, and he lent men to help John Gainsford. The last week of *Wanderer's* stay Great-uncle Garnet had to leave to visit his leased grazing run fifty miles up the coast where his manager had met with an accident.

The night before his return *Wanderer* sailed, and Great-aunt Vanessa did not come home.

When Great-uncle Garnet returned, it was to find her gone. The last seen of her, the housekeeper said, was when she wrapped a coat around her and opened the door to go out, saying she was going to the end of the point to wave the yacht farewell. So she went out into the night and never came back.

It was no wonder, everyone said when they heard of it, that Vanessa had run off with the handsome Englishman. Garnet Allen was too old for her, for one thing, and anyhow it was crazy to expect a woman as beautiful as Vanessa to spend the best years of

her life stuck on a lonely point between sea and sky with only the seagulls for company.

But no one dared to say anything like that to Great-uncle Garnet. He alone never believed that she had sailed with John Gainsford. She was dead, he said. She had met with some accident, fallen from the cliffs, she was drowned. Even though the tides that wash around Cape Lost bring all the flotsam of the coast to lay upon the high-watermark of the beaches, and Great-aunt Vanessa's body never came home to rest, Great-uncle Garnet's faith did not alter. He loved his wife too much to believe that she could have left him.

He believed she was dead. A few weeks later a great storm swept the east coast of New Zealand, the shoreline was battered, and streams changed their courses. In the same storm, somewhere out in the island seas, the yacht *Wanderer* foundered. A few lines in the newspapers told Great-uncle Garnet that she was missing, believed lost at sea with all on board.

The old story haunted me that night, lying there with the shadow and silence of the bush overlapping us. Presently Bugle came and curled up, with loud grunts, against the back of my knees. It felt comfortable to have him there and I fell suddenly asleep, and when I woke it was dawn.

There was a chorus of tuis singing and quarrelling; it sounded as if there were dozens of them in the fringe of the bush only just above me. The sound of their wings as they flew was like the rustling of stiff silk.

Soon I heard Dunsany roll out of his blankets and go down to the creek to wash. I struggled up, too, and pulled on my boots. The water was icy cold, so I just dabbled my face and hands a little, and hurriedly combed and plaited my hair. It was a good thing that Aunt Belle could not see me, but after all it was no good being too fussy when we were on the road.

Merry started a fine fire crackling, and I fried bacon and left-over vegetables, and Merry made a billy of coffee and condensed milk. Old Goat came nosing around begging for bits of bread as we ate.

We were on the road again before the sun was hot. We reached the little township of Bell's Ford just before midday, and spelled the mob in the shade of the big overhanging willows that grew along the edge of the river bed. Dunsany sent Merry and me to the

little shop in the township to see what we could get in the way of stores.

Bell's Ford was the last bit of civilization we would see until we reached Cape Lost. From there on, Dunsany said, the road was no more than a bush track, with wash-outs made by the big floods that had struck the coast that spring. It was because of the floods that Great-uncle Garnet needed the replacements for his flocks. The creek that ran through the home pastures of Cape Lost had been dammed up by a slip. It had broken its banks, and the swollen waters had rushed down over the levels to the sea, sweeping hundreds of ewes and lambs before it. For many weeks—so Great-uncle Garnet told Dunsany—a haze of smoke had hung all along the cape beaches as the men collected the carcasses of the poor drowned beasts and burned them in piles of driftwood.

The store at Bell's Ford was a shabby-looking wooden building, with horses tethered to the veranda posts, and dogs sleeping in the patch of shade. A Japanese man in a white apron served us; he was the baker, and we bought several loaves of fresh bread, and butter and bacon. There was no meat, as the butcher killed only once a week, but we bought some tinned sausages. We also bought some ginger beer, lukewarm and fizzy, and drank it on the spot to give us the energy to make lunch for the men.

One the other side of Bell's Ford the country grew wilder and lonelier. There were few clearings. The ferny creeks with their pebble beds gave way to water that ran fast and foaming in stony gorges far below the narrow road. The blue bush hills towered steeply above us.

It was on the afternoon of the sixth day that we came out upon the sea. It was, I think, the hottest day of the trip, and all morning we had wound slowly round and round the bends of the steep hill road, the sheep strung out in a long, winding grey river so that we could have tossed a stone down on to the woolly backs from the bend above, and we could see Gyp, the lead dog, shuffling along with his tongue hanging. The dust drifted over us, and settled down smotheringly. It lay thick in our horses' manes and in the creases of our clothes. My denims were a dirty white colour, and Gentle Annie's glossy coat was grey. My tongue felt three sizes too large for my mouth. We were all sun-burned deeply brown and saddle-weary, thirsty and dirty.