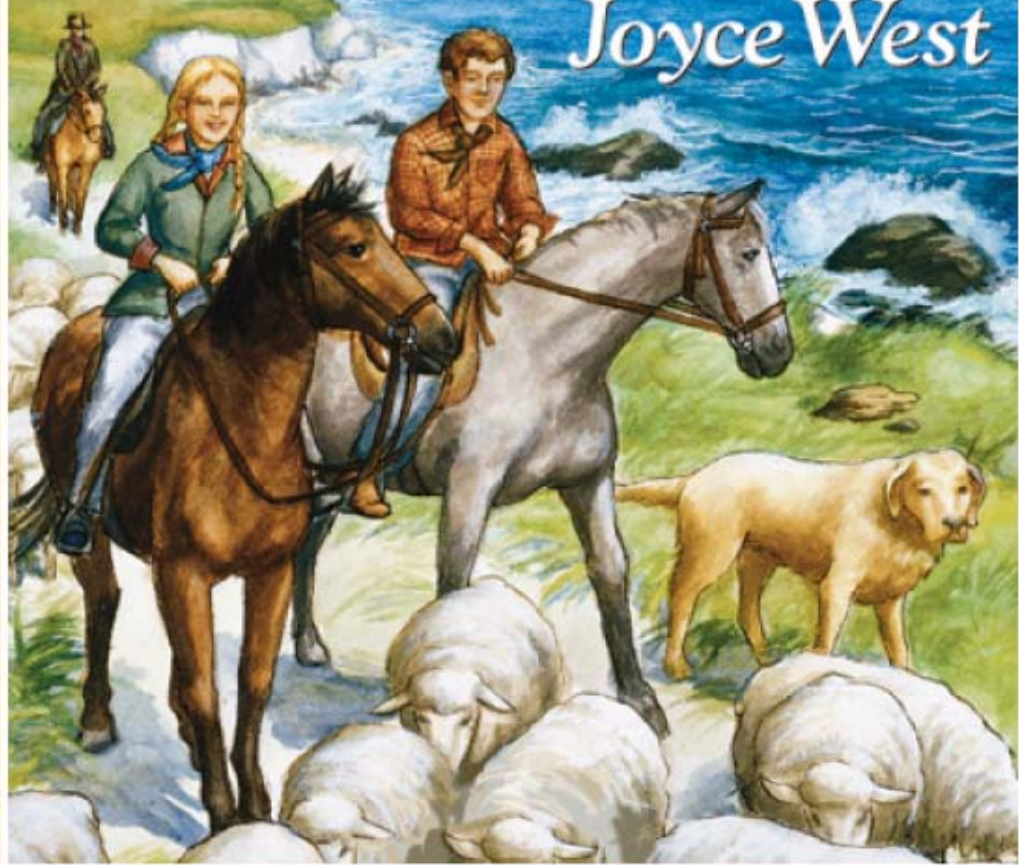


# The Drovers Road Collection

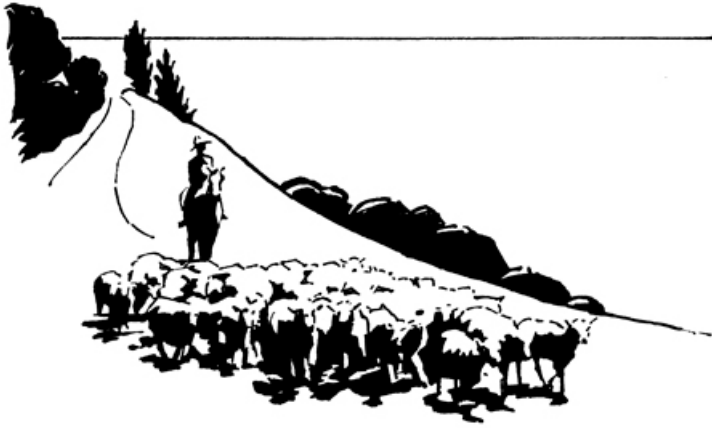
ADVENTURES in NEW ZEALAND

Joyce West



Book 3 • The Golden Country

# THE GOLDEN COUNTRY



by Joyce West

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# 1. Coming Home

For a little while, in the spring time, a gentleness comes over the harsh golden hills of Cape Lost. There is a green mist of new grass, and Great-aunt Vanessa's daffodils bloom under the apple trees. The evenings are bright with the skipping of young lambs.

When I came back to Cape Lost to live it was already summer. The crouching shapes of the hills with their painted blue shadows, the spindrift shimmering on the beaches, the white rocks of the cape hanging between sea and sky all helped to make up a picture which might have been torn from a child's book of fairy-tales. The only thing missing was the wicked giant, and I felt as if he might have been hiding behind the rocks.

I opened the gate, and Lenny Marshall drove the truck through and waited. I climbed back again beside Aunt Belle, and Lenny wrestled with the gear lever. There was not a great deal of room, because Bugle, our big hound dog, was sitting on my feet, and Aunt Belle was nursing a basket with a kitten in it. There were three more dogs in the back of the truck, together with some hens in a coop, suitcases, boxes of books, Aunt Belle's special gem-irons and coffee-pot and copper-bottomed saucepan, my saddle and bridle, Lenny's guitar and radio set, and two tubs filled with plants for the garden.

It was three years since Great-uncle Garnet's death, three years since I had left Drovers Road and Dunsany and Susan and Aunt Belle and the horses, and had gone to Massey Agricultural College to try to learn how to look after the property that had been left to me. Lenny's father, Ted Marshall, who had worked for us on Drovers Road as far back as I could remember, had managed Cape Lost for the first year, and then he and his family had grown too homesick to stay. Dunsany was only too glad to have Phillip back, for by then Dunsany had the added responsibility of the sheep-run next door, which belonged to my father. The bank had recommended a manager for Cape Lost, a middle-aged man called James Thompson. I had not seen very much of Mr. Thompson, but he always seemed to be in trouble trying to keep labour on the place. Lenny had worked with him, and Lenny disliked him. A heavy feeling of responsibility came upon me when I realized that,

whether I liked Mr. Thompson or not, I would be working with him from now on.

"It seems very dry," Aunt Belle said, looking out over the kitten's basket and Lenny's shoulder. "I'm afraid it's not a very good time of the year for transplanting things."

Thinking of Aunt Belle I began to feel responsible again. Aunt Belle had lived at Drovers Road ever since I had been a baby; she had looked after me and my three orphaned cousins, Hugh, Eve and Meredith, and my young uncle Dunsany. Since Dunsany's marriage she had kept house for him and Susan and their two little boys, whom she loved dearly. Now, for my sake, Aunt Belle had uprooted herself and come to Cape Lost to make a home for me. The plants in the tub at the back of the truck were all that she had of her garden.

"The dry weather is good for the shearing though," said Lenny, putting the truck into second gear to climb the rise. "Anyway, there is plenty of water here and this spring they talk so much about never goes dry."

Now we could see the homestead, square and grey and solid looking against its dark background of spear-topped pines. A side road swung to the right, away from the sea, leading to a spider's web of mustering-yards, and to the long low outline of the shearing shed.

Beyond the shed were quarters for the men, a cookhouse and three small separate rooms; the road climbed a little again to a comfortable looking house flanked about by hedges and orchard trees. This for some reason was always known as "the cottage;" in Great-uncle Garnet's time it had been the head shepherd's house. A man called Andy McLean had lived there for thirty years, and raised his family; when Great-uncle Garnet died Andy McLean could not imagine himself with another boss; he had packed up and gone to live with a daughter. The Marshalls had moved in after him, and then they had gone back to Drovers Road, and the Thompsons had come.

"Now what is going on?" said Lenny, slowing up and staring.

Outside the cottage there was a big truck backed up and partly loaded. While we watched two men came out carrying a table. There were no curtains at the windows.

Lenny looked at me and I looked at Aunt Belle. I wished that Dunsany was with us, or even Simon, our young English shepherd,

who was always quiet and sensible. I remembered that if anyone was going to do anything it would have to be me.

"You'd better drive down there," I said to Lenny.

When Mr. Thompson saw us he put down the two chairs he was carrying. I would have liked to get out of the truck in a very dignified way, but Bugle was sitting on my feet, and I had to struggle out from underneath him.

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Thompson?" I asked.

"Just that we're leaving, that's all," said Mr. Thompson, with his hands on his hips. He was a rather small man, and he pushed his chest out. "My wife hasn't ever liked it here; it's too lonely, gets on her nerves, and I'm sick of all the trouble trying to keep labour in this god-forsaken place, but I thought we'd treat you fair and wait until you got here to take over."

"I don't think you are treating me at all fairly!" I said. Because I was angry I did not feel shy any longer. "You owe me a month's notice; there hasn't been any talk of your leaving, and certainly not now, just as we are going to begin shearing. It would have been only fair to have given me a chance to get someone in your place."

Mr. Thompson gave me a rather nasty look, and I was glad to see Lenny swing down from the truck and come and stand beside me.

"It's pretty crook," said Lenny. "That's what I call it—walking out now, and leaving us short-handed for mustering and all. Pity Mr. Allan wasn't here, then you wouldn't have been game to do it!"

"Nobody's asking your opinion!" said Mr. Thompson. "There's no law against it, and we're going anyway, and I'd like my wages and holiday pay."

"You will get your wages from my accountant as usual," I said, trying to keep my voice firm. "Please get in touch with him, and he will deal with the matter. Come on, Lenny, I want to get up to the house."

Lenny turned the truck, and we bumped back up the road. None of us spoke for a few minutes.

"Maybe we should see what he is *taking away with him!*" said Lenny in a dark voice. "I've never liked that fellow anyway!"

We drove into the yard at the back of the homestead. There was a wide sweep of gravel and a long solid log hitching-rail for



horses. Under the shade of a weeping willow tree a standpipe spilled a small clear stream of water into a brimming trough.

"Oh, I'm thirsty!" I said.

I was holding the dipper under the stream when a picture rose in my mind, sharp and clear, of the first time that I had seen it. We were at the end of a long day's ride behind a mob of sheep, Dunsany and Merry and I; Great-uncle Garnet had stood there, dark and gentle and courtly, and had filled the dipper for me.

"Be careful, Gabrielle," he had said. "If you drink the famous water of Cape Lost you are always supposed to come back again!"

I had drunk, and now I had come back to Cape Lost to live.

When I went into the house Aunt Belle was already boiling a kettle for tea. The kitchen was a big room, with a very large old-fashioned wood-burning range across one corner. Aunt Belle had started a fire and now she was taking cups out of the cupboard to wash them. The cups were old-fashioned too; they had a blue willow pattern on them, and a row of plates to match stood across the shelves of the upright wooden dresser. Lenny went out to the wood-pile and brought in an armful of short dry manuka pieces. I unpacked the bread, and a pound of butter wrapped in damp lettuce leaves to keep it cool. The smell of the bread, sweet, home-baked and yeasty, made me think of Drovers Road, and suddenly the tears pricked at the back of my eyes.

I turned away quickly so that Aunt Belle should not see my face, and at that moment I heard the roar and clatter of an old motor vehicle climbing the road. We all three went to the door and looked out.

"The shearers!" Lenny exclaimed in a gloomy voice.

The shearers' truck was old and battered and piled high with people and belongings. As it bumped around the bend toward the yards dust flowed from under the wheels, and a column of steam rose above the radiator.

"And nothing ready!" said Lenny, waving his hands. Mostly you would never have known, to hear the Marshalls speak, that they had Maori blood, but when Lenny was excited, as he was now, he waved his arms and sounded very dramatic. "No mustering done! What shall we do now? *He* must have known they were coming, that old Thompson, going away and saying nothing! That was a very dirty trick to play!"

"First you had better go down and see them settled in, Lenny," I said, trying to keep calm.

When he had gone I turned to Aunt Belle. "What are we going to do, Aunt Belle?"

Aunt Belle poured out two cups of tea and put the cosy over the teapot to keep Lenny's tea warm, and then she sat down and took the kitten on her knee.

"You could always send a telegram to Dunsany and ask him to help you out. No matter how busy he is he would never see us stuck."

"I expect he would send Simon," I said. I could imagine Simon coming, quiet and capable, and taking charge. I was not sure that I wanted Simon. I was not going to be able to beg for help every time I needed it; it seemed to me suddenly that I might as well learn now as any other time to get through difficulties by myself.

Aunt Belle stroked the kitten.

"I think . . . I said. "It seems to me I shouldn't go running back home for help the very first time something goes wrong. I feel as if we should try to manage."

Aunt Belle said nothing, but I could see by the look on her face that she was pleased with me. She got up to pour herself another cup of tea, and at that minute Lenny came charging through the door.

"This is our unlucky day!" he said. "What do you think has happened now? Their cook, a very big fat woman, fell off the back of the truck and broke her arm, and had to go back home, and now they say they can only stay here if someone will cook for them, else they will go to Tangihau, and come back to us later."

"Don't let them go!" I said quickly. "We'll get someone to cook; I'll go down to Waimiha and see if we can get anyone."

"You don't have to go looking," Aunt Belle said calmly. "I've cooked for shearers many a time, and I'm quite capable of doing it again. Get me a pencil and paper and I'll make a list. You go right ahead and look after the mustering, and leave the rest to me. Butter, jam, cheese, flour—good thing I brought yeast—tinned sausages for breakfast, I think; you'd better kill a sheep tonight, Lenny, and I'll need firewood if I'm going to make a batch of bread."

"I'll go to Waimiha for the stores," I said, "and then we can yard up some of those hoggets on the flats for the shearers to begin on in the morning."