

"The Laird"

by John Collee

1. Ewan takes his wife on A Sentimental Journey

Ewan and Caroline's marriage is on the rocks. He's a rather down-at-heel government accountant working in some faceless department in London. In a last ditch attempt to rejuvenate their relationship he takes her one weekend to his birthplace in the Scottish Highlands - the mountain village of Pittscottie, of which he retains idyllic childhood memories.

2. The Village is not as he remembers it

When they find it, the village it's a shambles. The hotel has recently closed down, the main road is pot-holed, many of the houses are for sale and an air of rank dejection hangs over the place.

3. The Story of Pitscottie's decline

Sheltering from the rain in the deserted pub, they are adopted by the local drunkard, Archie, who tells them the tale of the village's misfortunes. The local distillery, the area's main employer, is being closed because its unprofitable. The rail link was lost due to privatisation of Scot-Rail and the only tourist attraction - a historic coal mine, has fallen into ruin. A final appeal for a government development grant was turned down. When the distillery finally closes the village will be finished for good.

4. Caroline Wants a Divorce

On the flight home Caroline tells Ewan that after 8 years of marriage she has decided to leave him. She's moving in with a guy in London, with whom she's been having an affair for the last three years.

5. Ewan is Summoned to see the Boss

Back in London Ewan returns to the job he has held since

leaving University. Here in the corridors of power the atmosphere is cloistered, snobbish and institutional. When he's summoned to the office of his ultimate superior - Lord Hurlingham - he has a nasty feeling he's going to be laid off but to his surprise,

6. The Offer

Hurlingham has a job for him, straightening out the books on an un-named and unidentified Government project. Hurlingham tells him that its all a bit hush-hush so they can't run it through the main accounting department, but Ewan, who occupies his own little backwater, is ideally placed to handle it.

7. Ewan starts work on the mysterious account

Ewan attacks the accounts with his customary fastidiousness. At the end of each day he returns to the half-empty house in North London, now rapidly sliding into disrepair. He no longer has the energy to fix things.

8. The Job gets more complex

The mysterious accounting job he's been assigned expands to fill the gap. More and more file-boxes keep arriving on his desk with details of mysterious past. Ewan still has no idea what the project is all about; but what he has discovered is that the interest on this account has never been calculated. As a result there are earnings of close to two hundred thousand pounds which need to be reported to the auditor's office.

9. The problem of the spare cash

Ewan reports this to Hurlingham who seems not to want to know about the project and instructs him irritably that if there's too much money, simply to get rid of the excess. "Where?" Ewan asks. "Anywhere," Lord Hurlingham says, "your favourite charity, for God's sake - use some

imagination."

The problem preys on his mind for about a week before he finally decides to take the money out of the bank account where it currently resides and donate it to the village of Pitscottie.

10. Return to Pitscottie

Any donation or "investment" requires paperwork and Ewan has been instructed to leave no trace of where the money goes. He decides to go to Pitscottie in person - buy a ruined building and pay the money to local tradesmen, who will always take cash.

He adopts a pseudonym, flies to the Scottish Highlands first class, hires a flash car and heads for Pitscottie.

11. Local Tradesmen exploit him

Of course at first the local tradesmen can't believe their luck - an absentee landlord, buying some crappy old cottage, apparently unconcerned how much it costs and prepared to pay cash. They start off ripping Ewan off shamelessly, but in the course of time, Ewan's unquestioning generosity wins them over and they begin to form a close friendship with him.

12. Ewan keeps donating

Ewan flies to Pitscottie every weekend. Gradually he falls in love with the community and its people. Gradually he begins to rediscover his roots. Memories of a long-forgotten Highlands childhood begin flooding back. Gradually he discovers more and more projects for which his money might be used.

13. The bottomless money-pit

Of course the sum he has to get rid of is finite but, back in

London, Ewan is beginning to perceive the truth of his accounting job. What he seems to be involved in is a secret slush fund of some sort. Millions of dollars are involved but oddly, none of the companies named on the receipts seem to exist on the public register and no-one except him knows what sums go in and come out. He got rid of two hundred thousand and nobody blinked. It strikes him that he could lighten the fund by a couple of million and no-one would be any the wiser.

14. Ewan meets Margo

In Pitscottie, Ewan reveals his “true” identity as an Australian resources millionaire with a soft spot for the Scottish Highlands and very deep pockets. The only person in Pitscottie not delighted by this revelation is Margo, the local postmistress, who has come to nurture a secret passion for Ewan. At times he vaguely reminds her of a little boy who lived next door when she was seven years old. Now she realises he is nothing like that little boy. He is out of her league.

15. Ewan's confidence grows

Over the next couple of years Ewan's money and influence finds its way into every corner of Pitscottie. He buys a share in the whisky distillery, employs the capable Margo as a public relations person there and re-launches Pitscottie malt on the market.

16. Knock on Effects in the Community

He puts Archie, the drunken poacher, in charge of fisheries and starts restocking the local river with salmon. He befriends Angus, the cowboy builder who earlier fleeced him mercilessly and together they set up a company to restore Pitscottie coal mines as a national monument. Even the Reverend Menzies, who has always been suspicious about the source of Ewan's fantastic wealth is finally won over with a community programme to restore and refurbish the church.

Thus, one by one, the embittered, the cynical, the morally and financially bankrupt of the community, are revitalised with Ewan's money. Ewan is a changed man - decisive, bold and dynamic. Pittscottie is thriving with him, and like all success stories, the place begins to attract attention to itself.

17. Ewan Attracts the attention of Kate

Kate Fletcher the beautiful and cultured widow of a neighbouring landowner begins bombarding Ewan with social invitations. Knowing her to be socially connected with his bosses back in London, Ewan steadfastly refuses to get involved, which only serves to increase her curiosity.

18. The investigation begins

Meanwhile in London a stranger turns up in Ewan's little basement office. He says he's working next door and seems friendly but Ewan guesses that he's being spied on - someone has begun to smell a rat.

He knows now that if he's found out he'll go to jail and that the whole Pittscottie community could collapse.

19. The community get nervous

At Pittscottie he starts trying to write himself out of his various business agreements, so that if he is asked to repay the money he embezzled, the locals will at least be secure. But this process of disengagement spreads fear through the community. They become worried that Ewan was merely speculating with their businesses and is now planning to ditch them with the work half done.

20. Ewan is busted

Around this time, Ewan is invited to Kate Fletcher's summer garden party. Feeling friendless and in need of distraction he rashly accepts.

He is now very adept at playing the part of the resources millionaire. Even in the company of genuine resources types he maintains his cover, drawing on his knowledge of his ex-wife's sleazy partner. Everyone warms to him. He feels intoxicated by success, invulnerable. Until his boss, Lord Hurlingham arrives at the party, and Ewan, trying frantically to escape via the servants entrance, is unmasked as an impostor.

21. The Investigation reaches its conclusion

Back in London, Ewan goes to Hurlingham's office prepared to face the worst punishment the establishment can dish out. But just when we think all is lost, up pops Ewan's neighbour, the man in the adjoining office.

His name is Detective Shearer and he has been secretly monitoring the account which Ewan is administering. What he's discovered is that Hurlingham and his cronies are circumventing the government's own regulations on arms sales, selling arms to Indonesia and using the funds for pork-barrelling projects to get the unpopular Liberal government.

22. Hurlingham's excuse

This all comes out in front of an all-party investigative committee. Looking for a way out, Hurlingham claims that the funds are actually being used for a secret rural development initiative, of which Pitscottie was the pilot project.

To save their own skins all the handful of London mandarins who have been colluding with Hurlingham adopt the same line. Ewan is happy to go along with this fiction on condition that he is allowed to retire and return to Pitscottie to administer his various interests there.

23. Ewan is freed

London is pleased to let him go, Ewan is relieved that he won't be going to prison after all, and the villagers of Pitscottie are delighted to have him back, even without his grand title and his money - the community can sustain itself financially now.

24. True love blossoms

Finding him to be a fraud Kate Fletcher has lost interest, but Margo the postmistress who has been his support and adviser all along now declares her love for him and Ewan is finally able to reveal to her that yes, he was that little boy who lived next door to her all those years ago. He loved her then and he loves her still. He moves in to her cottage and the pair live happily ever after.