

Act 1

Scene. *Stage maybe a couple of chairs off to one side and a small table stage right. Opens with Jacobs on stage. Beal and two ladies sit somewhere in the audience. Stage lights on.*

Jacobs: **(In a flat monotone voice)** Strange isn't it, when you enter a raffle, or tombola, or even the lottery, you know, or have a good idea of what you might win, if you're lucky. But in life you can never tell where you'll end up. Oh you can steer your own course but there are things that can happen to make you veer off on a tangent. You may be able to get yourself back on track, or you may not want to. Your new road might be so full of excitement and fulfilment that you wish you'd taken it sooner in your life, if you had known that it existed of course. On the other hand the new road you find yourself on might be so full of uncertainty, and danger that you want to get off as soon as possible, but circumstances don't allow for that, and you find that you are being carried along at a terrifying pace without being able to turn or leave. A bit like being in the outside lane of the motorway and the other lanes are full of speeding traffic and the exit road you want has been closed. Or worse still, and I don't know if you can remember the trams in the towns and cities, but riding your bicycle and getting your wheel in the tram line when you're going downhill, then noticing that a tram is coming up the hill towards you on the same line. Panic sets in quickly, you can't think fast enough, you can't see any way out of the inevitable. You can't see that there is a junction between you and the tram and that he is turning right while you are heading straight on.

Beal: Excuse me sir but are you trying to bore your audience to death or drive them out of here and into the nearest public bar?

Jacobs: I don't understand you.

Beal: It's quite simple, you are addressing your audience in a monotonic voice. There isn't any light and shade in your voice; it's all the same level and quite boring. Can you sing?

Jacobs: I beg your pardon!

Beal: I asked you if you could sing Mr Jacobs.

Jacobs: Well I don't see the reason for the question, but no..... I can't... why?

Beal: No! I thought not. Well if you could move up and down the musical scale when you talk it would make your presentation more pleasant to the ear of your audience.

Jacobs: You keep mentioning this audience Mr Beal. This is solely for my family and maybe a few good and close friends, I thought that I'd made that clear when I hired you.

Beal: Are they not an audience Mr Jacobs? If my memory serves me correctly the definition of an audience is a group of people gathered to listen to, or watch a performance, and what you are paying me for is to teach you how to perform this story.

Jacobs: I stand corrected Mr Beal, thank you. But my voice is my voice; it is the one I was born with. I sir cannot help it if my voice is boring and monotonous.

Beal: If I may be allowed to correct you, the voice you have now was not the one you were born with. Did you not go through puberty? Did not your voice lower when you went through it?

Jacobs: Of course I went through puberty. Alright! This is the voice I have had since puberty.

Beal: Right! Now we have established that fact, you hired me to teach you how to talk. Sorry! How to present a story to a listening audience, now with my help you will not put them to sleep, or drive them to the nearest pub in the first five minutes.

Jacobs: Right Mr Beal! So teach me.

Beal: **(Moving to stage)** Now to your voice, go up the musical scale.

Jacobs: Which is?

Beal: **(Going up the scale.)** Doh, Ray, Meh, Far Soh, Lah, Tee, Doh.

Jacobs: **(Flatly)** Doo, Ray, Me, Far, So, La, Te, Doo.

Beal: Repeat after me. **(Going up the scale.)** Doh, Ray, Meh, Far, So, Lah, Tee, Doh.

Jacobs: **(Going up the scale)** Doh, Ray, Me, Far, So, La, Te, Doh.

Beal: **(Getting on the stage)** Very good. Of course you need to practice a little. Just think of your voice as the rolling hills that surround this town, or the waves of the sea as it.....

Jacobs: **(Taking Beal by the shoulders)** Not the sea sir I beg you not the..... that. Never mention that again Mr Beal I beseech you. **(Shaking him)** Never..... do you hear me sir?..... Do you?

Beal: **(Shrugging Jacobs off)** I do Mr Jacobs sir and I beg your forgiveness. Is this something to do with your tale Mr Jacobs?

Jacobs: **(Moving to leave stage)** Ask not Mr Beal... Ask not.

Beal: I think that we have done enough for one day Mr Jacobs. I will see you in the morning?

Jacobs: No. I can't go through with this. It was all a mistake, I see it now. Yes a mistake. Good day. No! Good bye Mr Beal.

Beal: But Mr Jacobs! If I may remind you. You have paid for the hire of this theatre for one week. Also you have paid me one week's wages to teach you how to present a story. As I informed you at the time, I start work on a new production on Monday next, so will not be available after that.

Jacobs: **(Putting his hand up to shield his eyes from the light and peer out into auditorium)** I am well aware of those facts Mr Beal. As I said! All this was a mistake. Good day Mr Beal. Did I see two ladies sitting with you?

Beal: You did Mr Jacobs. I thought that they may be able to help you in the telling of this tale, and learn the art of acting at the same time.

Jacobs: I am sorry that you have wasted your time ladies. I will of course recompense you for your time. **(He drops his hand and turns to leave)** Good night.

(Lights off wait ten seconds then up.)

Beal: **(All Beal from now is from audience)** Mr Jacobs? Good morning to you. I am pleased that you changed your mind.

Jacobs: Good morning? Is it Mr Beal? Is it really good? I suppose it must be as the nightmares stop during the daylight hours. That is one good thing Mr Beal. **(Peering out, hand shielding his eyes again)** I see that the ladies are with you again Mr Beal.

Beal: They are. May I introduce Miss Adams and Mrs Rich. How would you like to proceed Mr Jacobs?

Jacobs: Good morning ladies. **(Drops hand)** Proceed? I don't quite follow you.

Beal: Well Mr Jacobs, have you ever heard of the book "The Woman in Black"?

Jacobs: Yes I've heard about it, and the play, and the film with that lad who was in the "Harry Potter" films. I was so intrigued by all the publicity that I went out and bought the book. I read a few reviews on it on the internet first. One person saying that they had two copies but neither

went into the bedroom as it was too scary. Another that it was slow and hard to get into at first but worth persevering with. Well I don't agree with either of those comments. I found it a well written book with an interesting story line. I am not the sort of person who can imagine those sorts of things. I don't believe in ghosts Mr Beal..... **(Under breath)** Or at least I didn't..... What exactly do you mean?

Beal: Well Mr Jacobs, in the play, all of it is acted out by two people. One, playing the solicitor, to whom it all happens and the other is portraying an actor who is teaching the solicitor how to act. The actor plays the solicitor and the solicitor acts out all the other parts. That is to put it simply.

Jacobs: But in my story there are only two people..... **(Under breath)** Two real people anyway.

Beal: Do you feel you can start telling me your story?

Jacobs: I do. If, as you said last evening, these ladies are to help me in my narration, I have written them scripts to read, if they would be so kind. **(Waves two scripts. The ladies move up to stage, he hands the scripts to them as they get on stage and sit on the two chairs)** These are the exact words uttered by both Miss Vernon, who you could portray Miss Adams if you would. The other is of her secretary..... for Mrs Rich to perform. I also have a few notes of my own Mr Beal, just to jog my aging memory; it is after all over thirty years since this all occurred. And I must admit that I may stop and start quite a lot as this haunting comes back to me, but the only way to exorcise it is to tell it, is it not.

Beal: Indeed it is. When you are ready Mr Jacobs.

Jacobs: Strange isn't it when you enter a raffle or tombola.....

Beal: Forgive me but are you going to go through the preamble you went through yesterday?

Jacobs: I thought that I would yes. Why?

Beal: It is not needed Mr Jacobs. All you will be doing is sending your audience to sleep. May I ask? You say that you are performing this for your family and a few good and close friends.

Jacobs: That is correct yes. Why do you ask?

Beal: Your wife and children Mr Jacobs?

Jacobs: My wife died young Mr Beal. We'd been married for four years when she was killed by a drunken driver in nineteen seventy nine, I never remarried. I have a daughter but, I am afraid that I don't know where

she is at the moment. She travels the world working for this charity or that; I get a postcard or a letter from time to time saying where she is and what she is doing. Occasionally I am honoured with a visit, sometimes fleeting, sometimes not.

Beal: Thank you for sharing that with me. If we could put two chairs on the stage so that the ladies could sit down when not reading. If you are ready?

Jacobs: Where would you like me to start if you don't require the preamble Mr Beal?

Beal: When you first heard of your inheritance.

Jacobs: ***(Standing still centre stage)*** A friend and I had just set ourselves up in the accounting business, we were fresh out of university and knew it all. It was nineteen seventy four. I was at work in my office when I received a phone call. I asked who it was and she told me that she was a solicitor. A Miss Vernon, of Vernon, Coutch, and Vernon. She informed me that my Great Aunt Griselda had passed away and that I was the sole heir to her estate. I'd never heard of an Aunt called Griselda and told her so. She then asked for my father's name. Then, my father's father's name. When I gave her the names she confirmed that there was no mistake. I was the sole heir to the ladies estate. You could imagine my surprise Mr Beal, being told that one is the sole heir to someone you've never heard of. Miss Vernon left her telephone number and address because, as I told her, I couldn't just leave my business at the drop of a hat, I had work to do, clients to see to. I informed Miss Vernon that I would telephone her before the end of the month to say when I would be traveling up to North Yorkshire. A few days later I received an envelope with a little background to my late Aunt. As a child she wanted to be a ballerina and to that end her parents sent her to Paris. One of the best schools money could buy and she was good. She could have been great but she met and fell in love with a Count, thirty years her elder but they were in love. She gave everything up for him and moved into his Chateau in the south of France. There were two children, both boys, they were not yet ten when the Count died. My Aunt moved back to this country and purchased Hill House. As you can imagine, being the wife of a Count she was not short of money, and this being the time between the wars. Well when one son wanted a pony, he got a pony. Unfortunately within a few weeks something startled the pony, it threw him and tragically he passed away from his injuries. The elder son was killed in the Second World War; he was a pilot in the RAF. After this there was a blank, she lived on her own in that house until she passed on. It took the solicitors six months to locate me Mr Beal.

Beal: Your voice is rising and falling well Mr Jacobs, there is just one point and that is don't stand still in the middle of the stage. Move from one side to the other and from front to back. Use all the available stage Mr

Jacobs; it makes it more interesting if your audience has to follow you with their eyes.

Jacobs: But I thought that staying in one.....

Beal: You're not giving a lecture Mr Jacobs. Have you noticed, on the television they are forever switching from one camera to another, even during those quiz programs. It's to keep the audience interested. You are telling a story. Make it as interesting as possible.

Jacobs: Of course! Thank you Mr Beal. To tell the truth I'm feeling a little hungry, how would you feel about stopping for lunch?

Beal: That sounds fine to me.

Jacobs: Good I will see you in an hour Mr Beal, ladies.
(Lights off, wait ten seconds, lights on)

Beal: Are you ready to start again Mr Jacobs? One thing I forget to mention this morning Mr Jacobs. I realise that it may be difficult but try to act out your story.

Jacobs: I'm not sure that I follow you Mr Beal.

Beal: Well! If you, for instance, have to use the telephone then pretend you are using a telephone. If you are moving from one room to another, and I don't know whether you will be or not, then move across the stage and open and shut doors as you go. It is good that you are wearing leather soled shoes Mr Jacobs because they make a sound when you walk about the stage, make as much use of them as you can.

Jacobs: So when I'm in my Great Aunt's house move around the stage as if I were back there?

Beal: That's correct Mr Jacobs. It will make it all the more interesting for the people watching you.

Jacobs: But that will bring back the hideous memories for me.

Beal: I am afraid so Mr Jacobs, but didn't you say that you wanted to exorcise the demons?

Jacobs: I do, I just hope that they will depart after I have told my story. But I fear that I am doomed never to sleep a night's sleep ever again.

Beal: Can you remember Mr Jacobs what day or date the solicitor telephoned you?
(Just a spotlight on Jacobs head and shoulders, all else is dark)

Jacobs: I can't remember the day Mr Beal, but it was the twelfth of March. I know this because I had clients who were desperate for their tax returns, it being the end of the financial year.

Beal: Can you remember what date you rang the lady to say that you would be traveling up to Yorkshire?

Jacobs: That would have been the twenty eighth of March. I remember because my business partner and I discussed the issue and he said that he could manage on his own as the majority of the work had been completed.

Beal: So you rang Miss Vernon on the twenty eighth.

Jacobs: I did Mr Beal. I recall that it was a Thursday so I informed her, or rather her secretary that I would be driving up on the Saturday and asked if anyone would be in the office that day so that I could pick up the keys to the house. I wasn't sure how long the journey would take. She advised me to travel on the Friday, and to set off early in the morning as the office closed at four o'clock Friday until nine o'clock on the Monday.

Beal: Be careful here Mr Jacobs as your story could start to sound like a police report. In that on the twenty eighth of March at the said time and appointed place etc.

Jacobs: Yes! I see that Mr Beal, thank you.

Beal: My apologies for interrupting.

Jacobs: None needed. You are the teacher, and I the student. The following morning I arose early, and having packed a case the previous evening, set off from my home near Guildford on the journey north. I stopped two or three times on the route but it still took me six and a half hours to cover the distance to North Yorkshire. I arrived in the small market town and quickly located the offices of Vernon, Couth, and Vernon. I went in and there was a lady at the reception desk, an elderly lady, which I thought unusual but she didn't look out of place in that Victorian office. "Good day madam I am Mr Jacobs, I telephoned you yesterday."

Rich: ***(Sitting behind table, a light is shining up from the desk, lighting her face from below)*** "Good afternoon Mr Jacobs, I have been expecting you. I trust you had a pleasant journey. Miss Vernon has been called out I'm afraid but I have the keys to the house here and a little map. ***(Hands him some keys and a map)*** I'm afraid that it isn't that easy to find. The house is at the end of a narrow road, only wide enough for the passage of one vehicle. It's about four and a half miles, but please don't worry as the road is only used by the farmers in that

area and when you reach the junction and bear left the only users are those who are going to the house.” (*Her light goes off*)

Jacobs: (*Moving back to centre stage*) “Thank you madam you’ve been very kind.” I consulted the map often and was pleased of it, because I think that I would have got quite lost once out of town and onto the rolling moorland. The road was indeed narrow and in parts I was rather afraid that I was going to scrape the side of the car on the dry stone walls. It seemed to follow the contours of the land rather than go up and down the hills, and in doing so I crossed many a stream, either by bridge or ford. I at last came to a junction in the road, and on consulting the map I saw that I had to take the left hand road. I must admit that I didn’t like the look of it Mr Beal. Grass was growing high down the centre of the road and it didn’t look as if it had been used for a long time, a very long time. However I didn’t know how much further I had to travel so, reluctantly I drove on. My fears were unfounded though Mr Beal because as I rounded the very next bend the dry stone walls receded and there in front of me the country side opened up. There was a bridge over a small stream, and as my eyes were drawn onward and upward there on the hill top stood the house in all its splendour, surrounded by manicured lawns and gardens. My breath was so taken away by the beauty of it all that I had to get out of my motor car and just look in awe at the spectacle of it all. Standing proud, as if to say, I own this land and all that go upon it, was the house. A magnificent example of gothic Victorian architecture. Its light grey stone walls contrasted with the dark grey slate roof and white painted windows. I couldn’t believe my eyes as I stood there looking up at that house. My house, Mr Beal, my house.

Beal: I can see that you have been taken back to that moment and, indeed I apologise to bring you back to the present but would you like to rest now Mr Jacobs and continue in the morning?

Jacobs: I was taken back Mr Beal. I could see that house as clearly as I can see you. Tell me will it be so during the telling of my entire story? Will I see everything as clearly as I just saw the house a minute or two ago?

Beal: I don’t know. That I do not know. If you do Mr Jacobs and wish to stop then do so, you only have me as an audience and I will understand fully what you are going through.

Jacobs: Will you Mr Beal? I thank you for your concern but I don’t think that you will know exactly what I am going through. No, I wouldn’t wish that on even my worst enemy.

(Lights off for ten seconds then on)

Jacobs: Good morning Mr Beal, ladies. I trust you slept well.

Beal: Good morning Mr Jacobs, I did indeed. Are you ready to continue?

Jacobs: I am, yes, Can you remember where I left off last evening?

Beal: You were out of your car, looking up at the house.

Jacobs: ***(Going through the motions)*** That's right. I came out of my reverie and found myself on the little bridge; I went back to the car and drove up the gravel drive. Arriving at the front of the house I looked out over the manicured lawn and gardens to the moorland beyond, but there was something in the air sir, I could smell something different on the breeze. I was trying to work out what it was when the penny dropped, I could smell the sea. I walked round to the back of the house; well I assumed it to be the back, and a few hundred yards from the house was a cliff down to the sea. I walked over and peered over the edge, it must have been a two hundred foot drop to the rock strewn beach below. The lawns grew right up to the cliff edge and were perfectly trimmed. Not a weed in sight Mr Beal. I remember wishing that my lawn at home was in as good a condition as this one. I walked back to the house and round to what I assumed to be the front. It was a squarish house sir with a door front and back, but as they both looked the same it made no difference which you called which.

Beal: For convenience Mr Jacobs call the land facing side the front and the sea facing side the back or rear.

Jacobs: Very well Mr Beal. I opened the front door and stepped back in time Mr Beal, or it felt like it. Back into the Victorian era. I stepped onto a highly polished parquet floor. Straight in front of me was the staircase rising up towards the rear wall where it split to left and right. The door to the left of me was open so I went in to find the dining room. All the furniture was covered in dust sheets; I lifted a corner of the one covering the table and found that the table was of mahogany, and highly polished, there were twelve chairs round the table. A side board stood against the wall opposite the window, the window blinds were open. At the far end of the room stood the fire place, clean and sparkling, there'd been no fire in that grate for some time Mr Beal. I left that room and went into the room directly opposite it, which I found to be a lounge. Again all the furniture was covered by dust sheets and, by peeking under them I found that the furniture was polished to within an inch of its life sir. In this room, as in the dining room the fire place was clean and the grate polished. There were portraits on the walls and as I stood there looking at them I wondered which one could have been my Great Aunt. I looked in the two other rooms downstairs, one being the drawing room and the other a library. Then behind the stairs I saw another door, one to the kitchen. I suppose it was a case of out of sight, out of mind Mr Beal, but the kitchen is the very hub of the house. I entered and found that I wasn't to be proved wrong; it was plainly obvious that my Great Aunt spent a lot of her time in the kitchen. There was a large wooden table running down the centre.

Beal: I am sorry to interrupt you Mr Jacobs but you keep saying was, shouldn't that be is?

Jacobs: Please allow me to finish my tale then all will become clear to you. Where was I?

Beal: A large wooden table running down the centre of the kitchen.

Jacobs: Ah yes! Thank you Mr Beal. On the table were a packet of envelopes and writing paper, pens and pencils. My Aunt must have been interested in puzzles because there were five or six puzzle books in varying stages of completion. She also must have been a keen fan of the court, as in Justice Mr Beal, because there were a good many books of fiction on that subject. To one side I noticed an electric cooker with a kettle stood on top, I hunted around and soon found some tea bags, sugar and powdered milk. I filled the kettle and decided to investigate the upstairs while it boiled. There were two bedrooms off the left landing, both with en suite bathrooms and the same on the right. Three of the bedrooms had the furniture covered with dust sheets but the fourth did not, this I assumed to be the bedroom of my Great Aunt. Apart from the bed in that room Mr Beal there was a wardrobe, along with a chest of drawers. Two bedside cabinets, one either side of the bed and a large blanket chest at the foot of the bed. On each of the bedside cabinets stood an electric lamp and a coaster, presumably to take a glass or cup should one wish to take a drink to bed with you. All was clean and tidy as if the maid or cleaning lady had just left, there was no dust to be seen, anywhere. No clothing left out, no shoes, or slippers beneath the bed, and the four poster bed impeccably neat and made Mr Beal. The large bathroom contained not only a bath with a shower over it but a sink unit and a dressing table with all the paraphernalia a lady likes around her when she is putting on her make up. Again all was clean and tidy. Everything had a place and was in that place, it was just as if the lady had simply gone out for the day. I felt as though I were intruding Mr Beal, as though my Aunt would return at any moment to scold me for my intrusion into her house. **(Sound of a kettle whistling)** Then I started to hear a high pitched whistling, I was looking round to find the source when I suddenly remembered that I'd put the kettle on. I rushed down the stairs and made myself a pot of tea, looking in the refrigerator I found some fresh vegetables and fruit as well as meat. I could at least cook myself a meal that night and drive down to the town the following day to do some shopping. I was determined to stay in the house and sort out things for at least a week. I didn't know exactly what I was going to sort out Mr Beal but there must have been papers of my Great Aunts to read through, to give me some greater idea of who she was and what she did, and who knew, she might even shed some light on the lives of her father, my Great Great grandfather.