

A SINGULAR DECEPTION: Audition pieces

BLACK JOHN (M, black, playing 20-70)

1 BEGINNING OF PLAY

John The question is always the same. Not the same words but the same meaning. Born of curiosity, spite, guilt. Sometimes all three. How did you find Dr Barry, John? Or: What *was* Dr Barry, boy? Boy! And me a grown man! And I duck my head, the way the white folk expect and smile. But say nothing. Tell them nothing. They call me slippery, sly, Black John, though that's not my name. I've been called worse. We both have. Much worse. But they can't hurt me or the doctor now. Besides, I gave my word long, long ago. And black or white, a promise is a promise.

2 YOUNG JOHN (probably 20s) – first meeting with Dr Barry

Barry Come.

The young John enters, apprehensively, with a letter. Barry rises

Barry You wished to see me? (*She extends a hand*)

John, not used to such courtesies, stares at it in astonishment. He takes Barry's hand. Is surprised by the strong grip

Barry Your name?

John John, Dr Barry.

Barry John ...?

John Just John, master.

Barry Your given name?

John After a fashion. In that it was given to me.

Barry You are not from these parts, I surmise.

John ... No, master.

Barry waits for more information. None is forthcoming

Barry Very well. I shall not pry. So be it. A man of mystery. What is the problem?

John Problem?

Barry I am a doctor. I assumed you wished me to attend upon you.

John No, master. *I wish to attend upon you.*

Barry I beg your pardon? Are you toying with me, man? I do not take kindly to having my valuable time wasted.

John No, master. So I was led to believe.

Barry By whom?

John Friends. Your friends.

Barry I have no friends. In any event, I would not count as a friend anyone who was so impertinent.

John hands Barry the letter

John These friends, master. Lord Buchan. General Miranda. *(As Barry swiftly scans it)* They felt – given the circumstances in which you find yourself –

Barry I am honoured to call them my benefactors. My sponsors. Enlightened gentlemen. They it was who set me on this ... who encouraged me to ... But I would not presume to call them friends. Though their advice is always sound, always wise. *(Barry looks at the letter again)* So, they feel I could use ... a ... what would you call yourself? A valet?

John Manservant? That is how the Earl described it to me.

Barry A post of some intimacy, John. Considerable intimacy. *(Struggling)* Did the the Earl – these gentlemen – did they ... divulge anything of a personal nature about me?

A minefield

John ... they told me you were a remarkable doctor, master, of exceptional abilities, with uncompromising views –

Barry Uncompromising?! That makes me sound bombastic. Unreasonable. My views are based on science, man, science, observation, experience!

John Yes, master. I meant no offence, master. I think the gentlemen were simply trying to give me a flavour of your ... personality, your preferences and the like.

3 JOHN as Lady Georgina Somerset, the Governor's daughter

We are at a Government House Ball. John with a fan, becomes Lady Georgina Somerset, the Governor's daughter. She has a South African accent

Georgina *(as if to a confidante, referencing the oblivious Barry)* Oh, my dear! Dr Barry! So witty, so amusing. Those adorable hands! So small, so white! And of course, my personal saviour. Not to mention my father's! *(Her companion interrupts)* Oh, Eugenia, I did! I told you!

How we all despaired when darling Papa fell ill? The Colonial Schooner on hand to bear the terrible news to England in the event he should ... We were distraught. But, praise be, God in His infinite mercy sent us the good doctor. (*Interruption*) Dr Barry, Eugenia! Whom did you think I meant?! Pay attention! Night and day he attended Papa, and young though he was, he fought the other physicians like a tiger about his treatment and won the day. Like a tiger! There is nothing Papa would not do for Dr Barry. Nothing.

4 **JOBSON (A Scot and fellow medical student) in Edinburgh**

Jobson, a fellow student, Scottish, is vomiting copiously into the gutter outside the dissection room. Barry steps away to avoid any splashes on her clothes

Jobson Apologies, sir. A weak stomach. Ye didnae appear tae even blench when Mr Fyfe incised the abdomen and all they guts –

Barry Why would I? The human corpse is endlessly fascinating. Endlessly instructive. Forgive me –

Barry goes to leave

Jobson Mr Barry, is it, eh? (*Proffering a hand*) Jobson. (*After a momentary hesitation on Barry's part (is the hand germ-free?) they shake*) Ye've a strang handshake, sir!

Barry Why should I not?

Jobson Ah meant no offence. Only that, forgive me, ye're exceeding young. A prodigy, they say.

Barry So I'm told.

Jobson And no' from these pairts.

Barry does not reply

Jobson Frae Scotland, Ah mean.

A beat

Barry Ireland. Now, if you will excuse –

Jobson Ah've observed ye in oor lectures.

Barry Observed me? Why?

Jobson I thocht ye could use a pal. Ye seem tae be ...

Barry Yes?

Jobson Forgive ma manners, but ye appear ... very solitary.

Barry I am very *busy!* Studying. Learning. I do not have time –

Jobson And Ah heard tell that ye'd taen a batterin' the nicht. A bloody nose. I wondered if mebbe Ah might help.

Barry Who told you ... Help how?

Jobson Ah fecht. Ye ken? (*He demonstrates*) Ah box.

Barry Oh. And?

Jobson Weel, bein' handy wi' yer fists is no bad thing, eh. And when ye're ... lacking a wee bit in height, it can prove even more effective.

Barry How so?

Jobson The element of surprise. (*He feints a jab, and Barry falls back, startled*) Ye ken? Bullies dinnae expect those slighter than theyselves tae retaliate. (*Beat*) If ye'd permit me, Ah cud teach ye.

5 **THE END: JOHN is old, probably in his 60s** (Dr Barry is dead and, despite John's promise to bury her in the sheets she died in, the women Sophia Bishop has discovered the doctor's secret while laying her out)

John enters, realises what has been discovered

John (*Breaking down*) Oh doctor, no, no, no, God in Heaven no! I gave you my promise. After all these years ... God forgive me, sir. (*He cradles the doctor's uniform jacket as though, for the first, last and only time, he is cradling the doctor herself.*)

The doctor was right, of course. As usual. When the scandal broke – for the woman was as good as her word, shouting what she had discovered to the rooftops – the Army was humiliated. They – the men in charge - sprang into action. No military funeral for the Inspector General of Army Hospitals. A hurried burial in a neglected graveyard.

An image of Dr Barry's headstone in Kensal Rise Cemetery is projected, then fades

All records sealed for a hundred years and the name of Dr James Miranda Stuart Barry expunged as far as possible from all official documents. It was as if the doctor – and Black John – had never been. And yet ...

The only known picture of Dr Barry, Black John and Psyche appears