

An Evening With Lord Bramley

A Musical 'Whodunnit?'

By David Barrett

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An Evening With Lord Bramley - Dramatis Personae

Lord Edward Bramley (impersonating Jenkins, the butler)

Lady Alice Bramley

Gerard Hissington-Wasserby

Constance Whetherby, Gerard's fiancée

Enid Smythe

Colonel Ballister

Jenkins, the Butler

Mabel, the maid

Archibald, aka Inspector Witherspoon, (Lord Bramley's estranged heir)

Chorus of servants

Actors of The Poirot Players:

Mike, playing Lord Bramley

Geoff, playing Sir Richard Braithwaite M.P for Rutland

Claire, playing Lady Pamela, Richard's wife

Steve, playing O'Malley, the detective

Synopsis

Lord Bramley throws a dinner party with a difference. Many of the guests are not yet acquainted with him and he has invited a small company of actors to mingle with the guests posing as aristocrats. One of them is even to pose as Lord Bramley himself while Bramley takes the place of the butler, whom he has dismissed for the evening. Thus the stage is set for Bramley's first and only murder-mystery evening. Things go horribly wrong when the 'murder' turns out to be all too real.

Set

The period is nineteen-sixties. There are two doors UL and UR, two pairs of easy chairs DR and DL and a three-seater sofa slightly to L of C stage. The side board/drinks cabinet is UR and there is a card table and coffee table (with table cloth) in the seating area. There is a further small table pushed up against the wall UL, covered with a cloth. Entrances and exits should be swift and timely as in a farce. Where there is a simultaneous entrance and exit, both doors should be used.

Character Sketches

Lord Bramley: Quite a brash and outspoken peer with an eccentric sense of humour. Very hard-up but tries not to show it. Has a network of aristocratic friends and frequently name-drops. Has a slight stutter when he gets excited.

Lady Bramley: very straight-laced and serious with a habit of glaring at people when they speak to her. Abrupt with the servants. Hair always immaculately coiffured and decorated with a tiara. Fingers full of rings. Married into the aristocracy so not fully at ease with her station and needs to be ostentatious. Speaks in a slow, upper-crust drawl as if it is an effort.

Gerard Hissington-Wasserby: A wimp who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. His hair is slicked back in fifties style and he frequently mops his brow. Father is a wealthy banker and he has used his connections to get into parliament. Engaged to Constance but nervous of marriage. Cannot roll his rs. Is hen-pecked by Constance.

Constance Whetherby: Always has a cigarette-holder in her hand, even when it is empty. Seems to need a prop. She is very squeamish and prissy. Wears a big hair band. Wants to marry soon and frequently drops hints to Gerard, which he ignores. Has a rather silly laugh which always ends in a snort.

Enid Smythe: speaks to everyone as if they were a class of five year-olds. Speaks slowly and deliberately, emphasizing key-words in a sentence. She is rather frumpy and dresses like an old spinster. Secretly has a wicked sense of humour and is not easily shocked. Likes the booze. Large coloured, cheap-looking earrings.

Colonel Ballister: All tweed and bravado. Likes to talk about the regiment and bores people stiff. Very chivalrous and always jumps up for ladies, pulls their chairs out, pours wine etc. He takes a fancy to Enid. Paranoid and thinks there is a conspiracy.

ACT 1

Scene 1 *The Drawing Room at Bramley Hall*

(The drawing room is decorated in a rather dated style with traditional frilled standard lamps, leather chairs and sofa, several card tables, an ornate sideboard, candelabra on the mantle-piece and numerous family portraits around the walls. Jenkins, aka Lord Bramley, dressed as a butler, is busy arranging trays of glasses and pumping up the cushions in the drawing room. Enter the real Jenkins, in less-formal dress.)

BRAMLEY Ah, Jenkins, just in the nick of time. I need to ask you about the wine list.

JENKINS Certainly, my lord.

BRAMLEY You know I never venture into the cellar these days - damn gout. I've only a dim memory of the lie of the land. Will I be able to find the necessary intoxicants.

JENKINS My lord, permit me to remain and advise you.

BRAMLEY Certainly not, Jenkins, I've given you the night off and the night off you shall have.

JENKINS But, my lord,

BRAMLEY No buts.... You know how I like a practical joke, Jenkins. Tonight, I shall be Jenkins. My guests shall be arriving soon, including those from the Poirot Players and I shall wait on them.

JENKINS But, my lord, will your guests not recognise you?

BRAMLEY Absolutely not! Two of them have met Lady Bramley but none of them are yet known to me. I suppose they may have seen me from a distance, at the polo or the races, but they'll not recognise me out of my tweeds. And three of them are not really guests; they are actors. One will be playing myself and the two others will be masquerading as guests.

JENKINS And is Lady Bramley.....?

BRAMLEY In on the game, of course. She's always wanted to go to a murder-mystery dinner - and tonight she shall - in her own dining room.

JENKINS As you wish my lord. *(Aside)* I wouldn't want to be the one to spoil your little game.

BRAMLEY Now, about the cellar....

JENKINS Very well, my lord: *(The following dialogue should be rhythmic and increasing in dynamics and tempo.)*

Your first task, my lord, is to fill a flask with the best Madeira from the dark oak cask

BRAMLEY *(Parrot-fashion, attempting to memorise the instructions.)* A flask of Madeira from the dark oak cask.

JENKINS The next thing to do is to carry up the brew in the bottles coloured blue with a turquoise hue.

BRAMLEY Bottles coloured blue with a turquoise hue.

JENKINS Then take a quart of wine from the rack of pine made from burgundy grapes from the Duke's best vine.

BRAMLEY A quart of wine from the rack of pine.

JENKINS Don't forget to chill the champagne from Brazil but warm the brandy and keep it handy.

BRAMLEY Warm the brandy and keep it handy.

JENKINS From the back of the rack at the top of the stack, take a bottle of port with a light brown cork.

BRAMLEY A bottle of pork with a light brown court.

JENKINS The new red rum's in the rose coloured drum but you'd better watch out for the leaky spout.

BRAMLEY I'd better watch out for the speaky lout.

JENKINS That's everything, my lord.

BRAMLEY *(Aside)* Thank goodness for that. Thank you, Jenkins.

JENKINS Will that be all my Lord,

BRAMLEY Yes thank you, Jenkins.

JENKINS Very good sir, and good night sir.

BRAMLEY Good night Jenkins. *(To himself)* My first task is to fill a flask with the best Madeira from the dark oak cask.
(He exits, then re-enters, takes a decanter and exits again. Enter Mike, through the other door, dressed as Lord Bramley. He wanders around to take in the surroundings, inspects the drinks on the sideboard and sinks into one of the chairs.)

MIKE *(Practising his banter, he repeats the following line in several voices, eventually settling on a gravelly, slow aristocratic drawl with an occasional stutter. He jumps up to say the line the last time as if welcoming a guest.)*
Ah, good evening Sir Richard, Lady Pamela. Good of you to come at short notice.
(Jumping to one side and impersonating Lady Pamela) The pleasure is all ours, my lord. How gracious of you to invite us.
(Enter Bramley, as Jenkins, with the decanter, unseen by Mike.)
(In Bramley's voice) Do have a seat, my dear. Anywhere you like.
(Lady P) I think I'll sit over here in the corner. That way I won't make a nuisance of myself....

BRAMLEY Ahem!

MIKE Cor blimey, you made me jump. I mean, goodness, my man, you did give me a start.

BRAMLEY I say, you are a very good likeness, very aristocratic-looking. You haven't quite got the voice yet though.

MIKE I'm working on it. *(Mistaking Bramley for one of the servants)* Where is the crazy old fart anyway?

BRAMLEY I...I...I....

MIKE He asked me to get here early so that I could acclimatise myself before welcoming the guests.

BRAMLEY *(Goes to speak, but is interrupted.)*

MIKE Don't tell me, he's in the library reading a leather-bound tome, or perhaps in his counting house, counting out his money, or in front of a mirror with a plumb in his mouth, practising his la-di-dah. I know what these stuck-up lords are like.
(Enter Mabel)

MABEL *(To Bramley)* My Lord, Lady Bramley has requested your assistance in the hall.

(Mike is frozen into a position of horror with a wide open mouth.)
 BRAMLEY Certainly, Mabel - and remember, from now on I'm Jenkins, the butler.
 MABEL Certainly, my lo..... Mister Jenkins.
 BRAMLEY *(Turning to Mike)* A splendid start, Mike. Keep it up. *(Exits)*
 MIKE *(Unfreezing)* Cor, strike a light, that was never 'im.
 MABEL That was Lord Bramley.
 MIKE *(Aside)* You've put your foot in it again, Mikey!
(To Mabel) But I just called him a crazy old fart.
 MABEL You....you *(Pointing from Mike to the door repeatedly)*...a crazy old
 fart?
*(She breaks into hysterical giggles. Mike goes to the door but as he opens
 it a long line of servants enters, carrying bowls of fruit, dusters, feather-
 dusters and brushes with dust pans. At the same time the introduction to
 the song starts. During the song, the servants dust sweep, wipe and set
 out the fruit on silver plates. Mabel continues to giggle throughout the
 song.)*

SONG 1 The Family Pedigree

Our story starts in Gloucestershire in nineteen twenty-three,
 At Bramley hall the family were as happy as could be,
 The master had come up trumps at last and sired a Bramley heir,
 Alas, the boy was a product of an extra-marital affair.
 It happened that a good nine months before this great event
 To the Ducal ball at Marden Hall, his lordship upped and went,
 The croquet lawn was filled with noble girls in frills and laces,
 But our gallant earl did not much care for noble airs and graces.

Chorus:

His mother simply did not count, his father was a peer,
 The old marquis was round the twist, the baron was a queer;
 His lordship's wild insanity and infamy is global,
 His counter-tenor's world-renowned, for he was born with nobles.
 The Bramley family pedigree with poor breeding is so tinged,
 The bright blue blood affects the brain and makes them quite unhinged.
 With heads held high, their battle cry: Lord Bramley is a crazy old fart.

It appears the peer did much prefer a girl of lower class,
 With rough white hands and aitches dropped and padding on her arse,
 With talk of love and romance he beguiled her as his match,
 He led her up the garden path and to the cabbage patch.
 The noble stud was seen in the mud with the buxom kitchen wench,
 And then the earl and the servant girl were seen on a garden bench.
 And so quite soon, on a full blue moon, beneath the duke's best vine.
 With a glass of wine they did entwine to propagate the Bramley line.

As months went by the Duke observed his maid become more plump,
 His hair did curl when the servant girl explained her swollen bump,
 In the blink of an eye the hue and cry spread through the noble community,
 The Duke packed her off to a convent with the promise of an annuity.

The poor young wench gave birth on cue though afterwards berated,
She lost her wits on that dreadful day, when the babe was confiscated.
Now, dear old lady Bramley she deserves to be a martyr,
For she took the baby as her own, although he was a bastard.

(During the last verse, Bramley enters with a hop and a skip, carrying a silver tray of glasses, which he places on the side-board. As the song ends Bramley and all the servants exit except Mabel. Mike pours himself a drink from the decanter, which he downs in one.)

MIKE You can't beat good old Dutch courage!
(He takes a silver bowl of grapes and moves to the corner chair. He continues to practise the dialogue as before and discovers that this is easier with some grapes in his mouth. As he practises he puts more and more grapes in his mouth. Meanwhile, Mabel still has the giggles. Picking up the Madeira decanter, she takes a long swig then notices the level looks a bit low. So, she looks around, takes some flowers out of a vase and tops up the decanter with the dirty vase water. She then wipes her mouth on the corner of the table-cloth and as she does so, enter Bramley. He does not notice Mike in the chair. While wiping her mouth, Mabel crouches and sings 'Lord Bramley is a Crazy Old Fart, then giggles.)

BRAMLEY *(Peering around the table.)* Mabel, what on earth are you doing?
MABEL My Lord, you startled me.
(She hiccups due to the effects of the Madeira.)

BRAMLEY My name is Jenkins, Mabel!
MABEL Yes, sorry Jenkins-Mabel
BRAMLEY No, just Jenkins.
MABEL Just Jenkins.
BRAMLEY *(Aside)* Now, where was I? Oh, yes, *(he does a little dance as he heads towards the door, chanting)* the next thing to do is to carry up the brew in the bottles coloured blue with a turquoise hue.

MABEL I beg your pardon, my lord?
BRAMLEY Mabel!
MABEL I mean, Mabel; I mean, Just Jenkins.
(The doorbell rings. Mike jumps up holding the bowl of grapes.)

BRAMLEY Tally Ho, they arrive at last. *(Exits)*
MABEL He really is a crazy old fart!
MIKE My goodness the t.t...t...time has arrived.
(He looks around for somewhere to put the bowl of grapes and places them on the chair he has just vacated.)
Good evening, Duchess, how nice to see you. *(He practises a few times. The last time he stutters. Enter Bramley with Lady Bramley, Gerard and Constance. Bramley stays upstage)*

BRAMLEY The Lady Bramley, Mr Gerard Hissington-Wasserby and fiancée,
Miss Constance Whetherby.

MIKE Thank you Jenkins I do know my own wife.
(He guffaws with laughter. Lady Bramley glares at him but Gerard and Constance join in politely with the laughter.)

MIKE Gerard, how nice to meet you; Constance I am charmed.

(*He bows slightly and kisses her hand.*)

CONST Why, thank you, your lordship.

MIKE I hear you're a cousin of the dear Lady Bramley, Gerard, from Australia.

GERARD New Zealand, actually, and quite a distant cousin. It would take too long to explain. In fact, I last saw Alice when I was a baby. Don't remember it, of course.

LADY I remember you - all wind, dribbles and boo hoos.

CONST I think that applies to all babies, my lady.

MIKE Well, what brings you here from the colonies.

CONST A boat! (*She guffaws.*)

GERARD A wedding, in fact - another cousin.

MIKE Oh, what jolly fun, eh! And they let you into the country with no problems?

LADY Edward! I said no convict jokes.

CONST Some of the populace are bred from good aristocratic stock, you see.

MIKE Breeding good stock, eh?

LADY You mean 'good breeding stock!'

GERARD Constance, dear, are you warm enough? There is a chill in the air tonight. (*Mike turns to the audience and mimics Gerard.*)

CONST Yes, thank you, darling.

GERARD Here, my love, come and sit down. (*He gestures to the corner chair where Mike put the bowl of grapes. She sits down abruptly on the bowl of grapes.*)

CONST (*Screams*) Oh, my gosh, what on earth?

LADY I'm so sorry, Constance, I have no idea how those got there.

CONST My dress, it's ruined!

LADY Come, my dear, let's get you cleaned up. I have a dress you can wear for tonight. (*They exit, Constance weeping.*)

MIKE Well, I must say, that's a novel way to press grapes. (*He dips his finger in the bowl.*)

Hmm, not bad, but I don't think this will be a vintage year. (*Gerard glares at him.*)

Now, t...t...t...tell me, old boy, what is your relationship with my wife.

GERARD I assure you, my lord, I have never..... Oh, I see what you mean. Now, let me see..... My great aunt Ada had a son called Hugh who married a girl that was well-to do. Their tenth child was weak and fair but she lived long enough to produce an heir. The heir was male of poor repute, whose affairs ended up with a paternity suit. If the lawyers were right on judgement day, without the benefit of D.N.A., each common-law wife who the scamp beguiled had ended up with just one child. He must have worked like a blue-tailed fly as the total count was rather high. Your dear wife was top of the tree and I was number thirty-three.

MIKE I wish I had never asked.

GERARD Oh, what does it matter anyway? It's all relative.

During the song, servants enter and exit doing chores. They contribute punch lines as they do so. Towards the end, Lady B and Constance return.

SONG 2 Relatively Speaking

Chorus

Relatively speaking we share a family tree,
Descended from our cousin the humble chimpanzee;
You can argue otherwise but they say 'the truth will out'!
If you take a look at cousin Percival, that's proof beyond all doubt.

Verse 1

Adam trusted Eve, his wife, with all his worldly goods,
Then one day she went out for a stroll and got lost in the woods;
Then all because a nasty snake promised Eve a jamboree,
She stole a juicy Granny Smith from Yahweh's favourite tree.
If you trace your family tree back through the mists of time,
You're sure to find your ancestors were guilty of some crime,
They may have robbed a highway coach or thieved a cask of wine,
And most would end up in the clink to do their stretch of time.

Chorus

Verse 2

Even first class citizens were not beyond reproach,
They used to water down the beer, put sand grains in the oats;
You may surely wonder why, with their educated brains,
They knew they'd go down under with their legs bound up in chains
They set off on the Mayflower, a most intrepid bunch,
Their bible in their left hand and in the other lunch;
They landed some months later in antipodean paradise,
But soon they got malaria, bubonic plague and lice.

Chorus

Verse 3

A budget class cruise liner at his majesty's expense,
Soon set off for this promised land, hold full of malcontents;
Instead of showing them the noose the judge he did propose,
To chuck 'em out of England to live amongst the dingoes

Final Chorus

Relatively speaking we're family you see,
You'll never meet a noble with a perfect pedigree;
We're all a load of mongrels - and if you don't agree;
We shall send you down to old Sydney town to join the colony.

(Doorbell Rings, servants exit hurriedly and Bramley exits to answer it.)

MIKE I say, more visitors, what jolly fun.
GERARD How many are you expecting, my lord.

MIKE Do call me Edward, young man. There will be four others; Colonel Ballister, retired, ex-army and now shooting pheasants, Enid Smythe, former headmistress and new arrival in the village, never met either of them before, then there's Sir Richard Braithwaite, M.P. for Rutland and his wife, Lady Pamela. Richard's an old friend.

CONST How super!
(Enter Bramley/Jenkins, followed by Sir Richard and Lady Pamela, aka Geoff and Claire. Bramley stands stiffly up-stage.)

JENKINS Sir Richard Braithwaite and Lady Pamela, your lordship.

MIKE Ah, good evening Sir Richard, Lady Pamela. Good of you to come at short notice.

GEOFF My Lord.
(He shakes hands with Richard and kisses Pamela on both cheeks.)

CLAIRE The pleasure is all ours, my lord. How gracious of you to invite us.

MIKE Do have a seat, my dear. Anywhere you like.

CLAIRE I think I'll sit over here in the corner. That way I won't make a nuisance of myself....

GEOFF *(Aside)* That will make a change.

CLAIRE You didn't say you lived in the middle of a swamp, Edward.

MIKE N...n...n...not a swamp, my dear Pamela, a marsh.

CLAIRE It's all the same colour.

MIKE Allow me to introduce the distant cousin! Gerard and his fiancée, Constance.

GEOFF How do you do Gerard, Constance.

CLAIRE Cousin eh? Accept our condolences. *(She giggles)*

MIKE Jenkins, aperitif, if you please, for the guests.

CONST Not for us, thank you. We'll wait for the meal.

GEOFF Don't mind if I do, Edward.
(Bramley pours a glass from the decanter.)
Thank you er.....

BRAMLEY Jenkins, sir.

GEOFF Thank you, Jenkins.
(Geoff takes a swig and gags on the taste. He immediately spits it into the flower-pot and empties the rest of the glass.)

CLAIRE So, Gerard, how are you related to Lady Bramley?

GERARD Well, it's like this.....
(The door-bell rings. Exit Jenkins.)

MIKE *(Aside.)* Thank goodness, saved by the bell.
That'll be the Colonel and Miss Smythe.

GEOFF Colonel? Which regiment would that be?

MIKE One of those in the army, I believe.

GERARD Oh, you are a wit, my lord.
(Enter Bramley, followed by Enid and the Colonel.)

BRAMLEY Miss Enid Smythe and Colonel Ballister, my lord.

MIKE Thank you Jennings.

BRAMLEY Jenkins, my lord.

MIKE As you wish.

COLONEL *(To Bramley)* I say, have we met before?

BRAMLEY I believe not, C.....C.....C..... *(The Colonel looks most confused.)*

ENID Colonel!

BRAMLEY Quite.

MIKE Ah, good evening Miss Smythe, Colonel. Good of you to come at short notice.

COLONEL Evening, my lord.

ENID Short notice? We received the invitation three months ago.

MIKE Of course you did. How forgetful of me.
Do have a seat my dear, anywhere you like.

ENID Thank you, my lord.

MIKE Now, we have had enough bowing and scraping for one evening. You may all call me - Mike, er I mean Edward.

BRAMLEY Thank you, Edward.

MIKE Not you, Jenkins, you're the b...b....b.....

ENID Butler?

BRAMLEY Very good, my lord.

COLONEL Brilliant observation, Edward. I suppose the black tie, white gloves and tails give it away rather.
(The dinner gong sounds)

GEOFF *(Looking at his watch)* I say, is there something wrong with the clock? It just struck one.

LADY That was the dinner gong!

COLONEL Where's it gone?

MIKE Ladies and gentlemen, If you would be so kind as to give me your attention. I have a pre-prandial announcement to make.

ENID What fun!

MIKE Tonight is no ordinary dinner party; it is a murder-mystery evening.

CLAIRE Oh goody!

COLONEL Murder-mystery? Does he think he's Poirot or something?

LADY He reads too many of those detective novels.

CONST Oh, you mean like Maygret!

MIKE As the evening progresses, you will realise that some of my guests are in fact actors!
(There is a murmur of surprise and they all look at one-another suspiciously.)
I would ask you not to be alarmed if anything....untoward should happen, such as a m....m....m.....

ENID A murder?

MIKE It is all part of the f.....f.....f.....

ENID Fun?

CONST I don't call it fun. I don't like murders and blood and that sort of thing.

GERARD Don't fret, my petal, it is just a game.

MIKE And now....if you'd like to join me for dinner. This way if you please.
(He holds out a white-gloved hand and the ladies file out first, chatting excitedly.)

COLONEL Do you know, I feel General Bingley is at last losing his marbles. He is an old acquaintance of yours and yet the description he gave me was quite inaccurate. I expected you to be much fatter.
(Bramley looks indignant and tries to pull in his stomach.)
(To Bramley, as they exit) Are you sure we haven't met, Jenkins.

BRAMLEY Quite sure, sir.

COLONEL Your face is quite familiar. I say, you don't ever have the odd flutter at the races, do you?
BRAMLEY Certainly not, sir. My wife would have a fit.
COLONEL Only if she knew about it, eh? *(Guffaws of laughter)*
(They exit.)

End of Scene