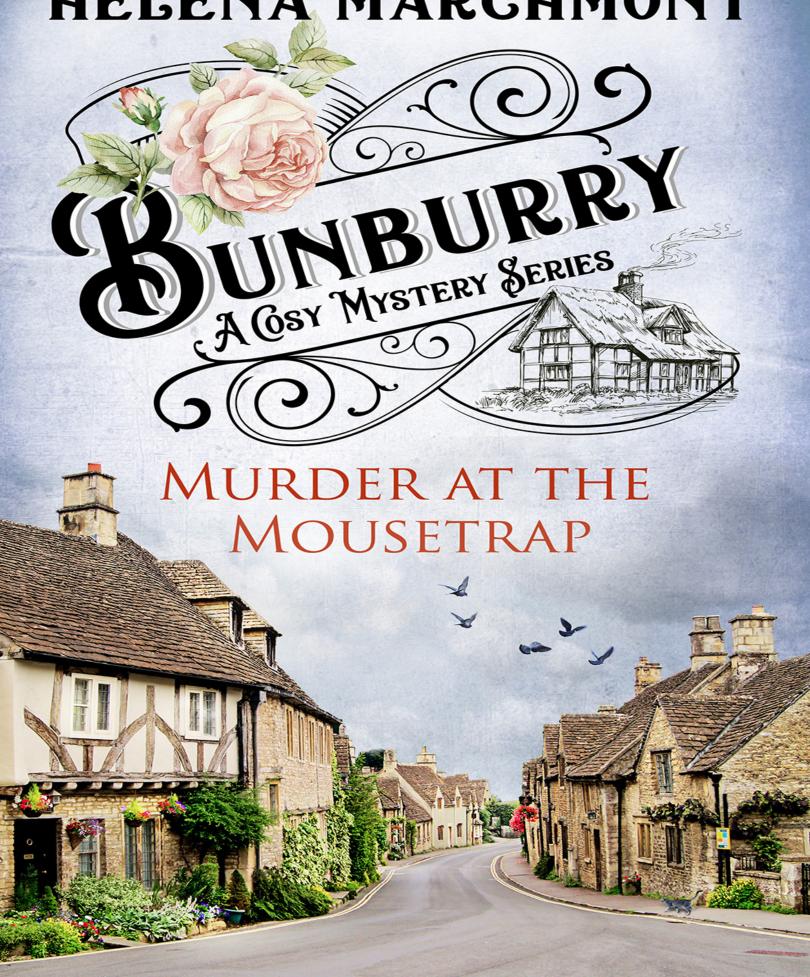
HELENA MARCHMONT



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# BUNBURRY - A GSY MYSTERY SERIES

Miss Marple meets Oscar Wilde in this new series of cosy mysteries set in the picturesque Cotswolds village of Bunburry. In "Murder at the Mousetrap," the first Bunburry book, fudge-making and quaffing real ale in the local pub are matched by an undercurrent of passion, jealousy, hatred and murder – laced with a welcome dose of humour.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Alfie McAlister has retreated from London to the peace and quiet of the country to recover from a personal tragedy. But an accidental death – which may have been no accident – reveals that the heart of England is far from the tranquil backwater he imagined. After arriving in Bunburry, he is co-opted as an amateur detective by Liz and Marge, two elderly ladies who were best friends with Alfie's late Aunt Augusta. And it is not long before their investigations take an even more dramatic turn ...

## THE AUTHOR

Helena Marchmont is a pseudonym of Olga Wojtas, who was born and brought up in Edinburgh. She was encouraged to write by an inspirational English teacher, Iona M. Cameron. Olga won a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award in 2015, has had more than 30 short stories published in magazines and anthologies and recently published her first mystery Miss Blaine's Prefect and the Golden Samovar.

## HELENA MARCHMONT



Murder at the Mousetrap



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#### Digital original edition

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. This book is written in British English.

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Edited by Allan Guthrie

Idea and series concept: Kathrin Kummer & Rebecca Schaarschmidt
Project editor: Kathrin Kummer
Cover design: Kirstin Osenau

Cover illustrations © shutterstock: JeniFoto | FreeProd33 | Canicula |
Sk\_Advance studio | ivangal | Nikola Barbutov
E-book production: Dörlemann Satz, Lemförde

ISBN 978-3-7325-5527-7

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This ebook contains an excerpt of "The Gentleman Vanishes" by Matthew
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# Anybody can be good in the country. There are no temptations there. Oscar Wilde

## (AST

**Alfie McAlister** flees the hustle and bustle of London for the peace and quiet of the Cotswolds. Unfortunately, the "heart of England" turns out to be deadlier than expected ...

Margaret "Marge" Redwood and Clarissa "Liz" Hopkins have lived in Bunburry their entire lives, where they are famous for their exceptional fudge-making skills. Between Afternoon Tea and Gin o'clock they relish a bit of sleuthing ...

**Emma Hollis** loves her job as policewoman, the only thing she is tired of are her aunt Liz's constant attempts at matchmaking.

**Betty Thorndike** is a fighter. Mostly for animal rights. She's the sole member of Bunburry's Green Party.

**Oscar de Linnet** lives in London and is Alfie's best friend. He tries luring Alfie back to the City because: "anybody can be good in the country. There are no temptations there."

**Augusta Lytton** is Alfie's aunt. She's dead. But still full of surprises ...

**Harold Wilson** loves a pint (or two) more than his job as local police sergeant.

**BUNBURRY** is a picturesque Cotswolds village, where sinister secrets lurk beneath the perfect façade ...

## 1. WELCOME TO BUNBURRY

The storm was worsening and the train gradually ground to a halt in the middle of nowhere. Alfie peered out into the blackness but could see nothing except the rain hammering against the window. Nothing could have been further from his memories of the Cotswolds. Over thirty years ago now, those idyllic summer holidays when he came to stay with his grandparents. Endless sun-filled days scampering over the hills, exploring the woods, cooling off in the streams. He had been happy because there was no reason to be sad. His boyhood self could never have imagined the sadness that was to come.

His memories were of July and August but his present reality was November. What was that poem? No warmth, no cheerfulness, no fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds, November.

His thoughts were interrupted by the announcement system crackling into life. "We apologise for the delay to the service. This is due to trees on the line."

Alfie reflected that at least it was a step up from the much-derided excuse for rail delays, "leaves on the line".

The disembodied voice continued, its nervousness palpable even through the static. "The trees on the line are due to the storm. This is a circumstance beyond our control and we are waiting for the removal of the trees. We apologise to passengers for any inconvenience caused."

The dark mumblings that indicated outrage on the part of the great British public broke out in the carriage.

"Oh, honestly!" muttered someone.

"They shouldn't allow trees so close to the line," muttered someone else.

Alfie opened his book again, a new biography of Oscar Wilde which had been getting rave reviews in all the papers. He realised he had been so caught up in his own thoughts that he was automatically turning the pages without taking in the words. As he flicked back to the beginning, the book fell open at the title page. He smiled as he wondered what anybody else would make of the ink inscription in bold copperplate handwriting:

## To Alfie Enjoy Bunburrying Oscar

Sometimes he wondered whether Oscar thought he was some sort of reincarnation of his namesake. Oscar was obsessed by all things Wildean, quoted his hero non-stop, and was known on occasion to complete his dandyish outfit with a green carnation, the mark of a true aficionado. If Oscar said this was the best book ever written about Wilde, Alfie wasn't going to argue.

But just as he settled down to read it properly, the carriage door swished open to reveal a young ticket collector, who looked distinctly apprehensive. Alfie guessed this was the owner of the disembodied voice. In an uncertain tone, the young man explained that there would be a delay of at least an hour before the track was cleared.

There was an outburst of protests, complaints about missed connections, anxious spouses, ruined dinners. The hapless ticket collector, who must already have run the gauntlet of the other carriages, looked as though he might now run away to join the circus.

Alfie took a gamble. "Not your fault, just one of these things," he said, raising his voice slightly so that he could

be heard by the other passengers. "Tell me, is the buffet trolley around?"

"It's right behind me, sir," said the ticket collector eagerly.

"Great," said Alfie. "Things always look better after a cup of tea."

"You obviously haven't tasted it, mate - it's rubbish!" came a voice from the other end of the carriage.

"Thanks for the warning," Alfie called back. "In that case, I'll add a G to the T, and things will look even better."

There was an outbreak of chuckling, and ripples of conversations.

"I haven't had the tea, but the coffee is really not bad."

"Yes, I think they must use those Arabica beans. You know, the good ones?"

"I couldn't drink coffee this late. I'd be awake all night."

"I'm sure you'd be fine. Arabica has far less caffeine in it. It's the instant stuff that's lethal."

"Have you tried the flapjacks? They're lovely and chewy."

"No, I don't have a sweet tooth. I go for the salt and vinegar crisps."

The ticket collector gazed at Alfie in gratitude for defusing the situation. "Can I help you with an onward connection, sir?" he asked.

Alfie shook his head. "I'm getting off at the next stop."

"Oh, Bunburry? We can't be more than five miles away. You could practically walk it."

The rain continued to batter against the windows. Alfie imagined himself heading off into the blackness, hauling his suitcase behind him. He had a sudden image of being trampled to death by a herd of enraged cows, and shuddered. Not a helpful thought. *Think of something else*.

Another voice broke in. "Do you want anything from the trolley, sir?"

Relieved, Alfie turned his attention to the trolley. He could have a gin and tonic if he wanted, but the atrocious weather outside made him feel in need of a hot drink. He went for coffee, along with a cheese and ham roll and a flapjack. The coffee was palatable, but very definitely instant. He reflected on human beings' infinite capacity to convince themselves of something that obviously wasn't true, one of the many things that had fascinated him during his psychology studies. He had no doubt that his fellow passenger would have no problem getting to sleep despite drinking coffee made from caffeine-packed beans.

The roll was substantial but uninspiring. But when he bit into the flapjack, he had an extraordinary sensation of being transported back through the years to when he was eight years old. It wasn't the same, but there was definitely something, something about the chewiness, the sweetness – he saw himself in his grandmother's kitchen, taking a tentative bite, and then cramming the rest of the square into his mouth to get every last bit of deliciousness. His mother smiling. "Good, isn't it? That's Bunburry fudge, the best fudge in the Cotswolds."

He had forgotten all about Bunburry fudge until this very moment. Probably so too had everyone else. Another part of his childhood that wouldn't be coming back. He ate the rest of the flapjack and returned to Oscar's book.

He had scarcely finished the first chapter when the train lurched into life. There was a collective sigh of relief and some scattered applause. Less than ten minutes later, the ticket collector's voice, more relaxed now, came over the announcement system. "The next stop is Bunburry. If you are leaving the train, please make sure you take all your personal belongings."

As Alfie put on his overcoat, he vaguely wondered what impersonal belongings were. He retrieved his suitcase, carefully stowing Oscar's book in the front pocket, and took out his foldaway umbrella.

He was the only person to leave at Bunburry. As he stepped on to the platform, a violent squall hit him full in the face. He struggled to open the umbrella while the train chugged away towards Cheltenham. His coat wasn't waterproof, and rain was already trickling down the back of his neck.

There was absolutely no sign of life. Bunburry's station was unstaffed. The station's lights were blurred by the heavy rain, and Alfie could see nothing beyond them. He realised he could hardly remember the layout of the village, but he was pretty sure he had to cross the railway bridge. He had hung over this bridge many times when he played with the local kids, watching the trains thunder under it while the sun blazed overhead. But now, as he clambered up the iron steps, the wind tore at his umbrella and wrenched it from his grasp. He watched it whirl away, probably to become a new cause of delayed trains: umbrellas on the line.

When he crossed the bridge, he found an ill-lit notice headed "Onward Travel Information". He used the light on his phone to read it. "There is no taxi rank in the vicinity of the station," it went on. "The nearest bus stop is situated outside the Post Office, approximately 750 metres. Village centre – 1.2 km – 15-minute walk."

Underneath was a map consisting of a jumble of streets, with no sign of a post office, bus stop or any other navigation point. He pushed open the wooden gate under the "Way Out" sign and gingerly made his way along a dark and narrow alley. His coat was already drenched. His expensive Italian leather shoes were made for continental promenades and art galleries, not icy puddles and treacherous cobblestones. His socks were sodden now, and he wished he was back on the train, particularly if it was returning to London.

He squelched to the end of the alley, and started negotiating the maze of rain-splattered buildings. It felt a