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Opening extract from

The Wombles

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CHAPTER I

Bungo

Once upon a time the Wombles went to live on – or rather under – Wimbledon Common in South-west London. There may be other Womble families in different parts of the world – in fact, there are – but the Wombles like to keep themselves to themselves, so once they've made a move and built themselves a comfortable waterproof burrow they tend to stay where they are.

The head of the Wimbledon Wombles is Great Uncle Bulgaria. He is very old indeed and his fur has turned snow-white and he feels the cold rather badly. So during the winter months he mostly sits in his own room in a large rocking chair, wearing a tartan shawl and two pairs of spectacles. He uses one pair for reading *The Times* newspaper and the other for looking at young Wombles who have misbehaved, and as this pair makes his eyes look ENORMOUS it has a very alarming effect. Many a young Womble has come out of Great Uncle Bulgaria's room with his (or her) fur standing up on end and his (or her) teeth chattering.

As well as the rocking chair there is a footstool and an electric fire. Years and years ago when Great Uncle Bulgaria's fur was just turning from grey to white, he had a coal fire which gave a lot of trouble. If the wind was blowing a certain way his room used to get full of smoke which made him cough and, even worse, when the wind was not blowing at all the smoke went straight up the chimney and up through the bracken and the Common Keepers would go and stamp all over

the ground thinking it was a fire in the bushes. And when they did that pieces of mud fell down the chimney into Great Uncle Bulgaria's room and made a dreadful mess and an even more dreadful smell. So Tobermory, who is very clever with his paws, made an electric fire out of bits of this and pieces of that and it makes the room nice and warm and gives no trouble at all.

And last, but very important indeed, there is Great Uncle Bulgaria's atlas. It is very large and very old and the pages have gone brown round the edges and some of them have come loose as well, although Tobermory has done his best to keep them in place with strips of sticky paper. It's a job which he dislikes because the sticky paper gets stuck to his fur, and the more he tries to get it off the more it sticks, so many of the maps have pieces of fur down the sides. The atlas is important because all the Wombles choose their own names out of it. Some of them spend a long, long time looking at all the different parts of the world to find just what will suit them, and some of them merely shut their eyes tight and point and hope for the best.

Which is how Bungo got *his* name.

'Serves you right,' said Great Uncle Bulgaria.

'I don't care, I like it,' said Bungo.

'Ho-hum,' said Great Uncle Bulgaria. 'Bungo it is then. Silly sort of name, but it quite suits *you*. Now then, young Womble, you're old enough to start work, which means you'll be going out on to the Common on your own. And *that* means you'll come across People, and People are very strange creatures.'

'I know,' said Bungo.

'No you don't. There's a lot you don't know. In fact, there's precious little you *do* know. Stand up straight and don't slouch. People are strange because they are untidy. Because they sometimes don't tell the truth and because most of them are so interested in their own affairs they just don't notice us. If possible you should avoid them, but if for one reason or another you have to speak to a Human Being always be polite and helpful. The chances are that they'll never even notice you're a Womble at all. But it's better to be safe than sorry so don't go looking for trouble. Now off you go and start work. *Bungo* indeed!'

And Great Uncle Bulgaria picked up *The Times* and shook out the pages and began to read, so Bungo went off feeling a little foolish, which was most unusual for him as he was quite certain that he was the bravest, the most adventurous and perhaps even the handsomest of all the Wombles.

He trotted down the long underground passage past all the small side turnings till he came to a door with WORKSHOP painted on it.

'Come in, come in,' said Tobermory's gruff voice when Bungo knocked.

Bungo had never been in the Workshop before and he went in rather timidly and his small eyes grew large as he looked about him. It was a big room with rows and rows of shelves all round the walls and each shelf was stacked high with all kinds of things. Gloves, shoes, gumboots, scarves, cameras, balls, racquets, skates, fishing rods, sticks, handbags, wallets, sweaters, socks, jars, bottles, Thermos flasks, papers, books, watches, brooches, necklaces, hats, suitcases, raincoats, baskets, buckets, all kinds of money and a lot more besides. All of them in neat piles and each pile neatly labelled, for the Wombles are the

tidiest creatures in the world.

And as if that wasn't enough to be going on with there were other rooms beyond with racks of larger objects. Bicycles and tricycles and scooters. Prams and deckchairs, wheels and tables and even parts of cars and caravans.

'Well!' said Bungo, slowly turning round and round.

'Ah ha!' said Tobermory, who was taking a radio to pieces on his workbench. His fur was turning grey and he wore a large blue apron and had a screwdriver tucked behind one ear and a pencil behind the other.

'Well, well, WELL,' said Bungo.

'What do you think of it, eh?' said Tobermory, his sharp eyes looking at Bungo although his busy paws never stopped working.

'It's very big, isn't it?' said Bungo. 'And there are such a lot of things. Do they all come from –?' and he jerked his head towards the ceiling.

'That they do. All left by People out on the Common. Pass me that tin marked "screws", young Womble.'

'I've got a name now. I'm –' Bungo cleared his

throat and looked rather shyly at Tobermory as he handed over the tin '– I'm Bungo. I *chose* it.'

'Sort of name you *would* choose. Silly sort of name. Yes, all my stores come from the Common. Human Beings are an untidy lot. They'd lose their legs and arms if they weren't joined on right. So you're old enough to start work, eh? Go and find yourself a basket. Over there, young Womble, on that shelf marked "Baskets". Can't you read?'

''Course I can,' said Bungo, rather hurt; but Tobermory was holding the radio up to his ear and shaking it and he didn't seem to hear, so Bungo sighed and went over to the shelf, where he picked out a large straw basket.

'Nice bit of work that,' said Tobermory, putting down the radio and looking at the basket. 'Hardly had to mend it at all when it was brought down to me. Just a stitch or two. Now remember, young Womble, it's our duty to keep the Common tidy. Just do your work properly and mind out for dogs. Dogs don't like Wombles and Wombles don't take kindly to dogs. Remember that. Now off you go! I'm busy.'

'*I'm* not afraid of dogs,' said Bungo.

'More fool you then,' said Tobermory. 'Shut the door behind you.'

Bungo had been looking forward to his first working day, for it's the point in a Womble's life when he feels nearly grown up. He has his own name at last and he is considered old enough and clever enough to venture into the outside world. In fact, Bungo had spent the last few nights imagining just how important he would feel and what a chance it would be to prove how brave and adventurous he was, but neither Great Uncle Bulgaria nor Tobermory had made any fuss of him, indeed they had called his spendid new name 'silly'.

'I'll show 'em,' muttered Bungo, doubling up his paws as he hurried down the passage. 'And if I meet any dogs I'll show *them* too.' And he gave a hop, skip and a jump because he suddenly felt excited again.

He pretended not to see all the other young Wombles whom he passed and his nose was very much in the air until he reached the main door which opened on to the Common. Sitting beside the door and reading a comic very slowly was the

Nightwatch Womble, Tomsk. He blinked sleepily at Bungo, asked his name and wrote it down carefully in a large book. Then he unlocked the door and opened it and at once Bungo could smell the cool dawn air and hear the birds and a dog barking in the distance and all at once he didn't feel quite so brave after all.

However he couldn't let Tomsk know that, so Bungo whistled softly to himself and then hummed as the door was shut behind him and then very, very slowly he walked up the last winding passage until there was nothing between him and the outside world but bushes and ferns.

Bungo's nose appeared first and then his bright little eyes and then his round, furry body. As he was not very tall he couldn't see much except the tops of the bushes, which were laced with spiders' webs and dew that glittered and danced in the early morning sunlight.

Bungo parted the bushes and edged his way between the leaves and grunted to himself as he made for the patch of Common which he was to look after. It was not a very large piece, but it had got a wooden bench on it and Bungo knew, from



listening to the conversation of other Wombles, that where there was a seat for Human Beings there was also bound to be something to tidy up. He soon noticed some pieces of paper and within a few seconds Bungo's paws had picked up two chocolate bar wrappers, a handkerchief with 'D. Smith' on it, and an evening paper.

'*Tsk*, *tsk*, *tsk*,' said Bungo, feeling quite a Womble of the world, 'they're an untidy lot these Humans. *Tsk*, *tsk*, *tsk*.'

Once he started looking it was really astonishing

how much there was to find. A pencil, one half of a return railway ticket to Victoria Station, quite a long piece of string and a library ticket were soon added to Bungo's collection, and he became so pleased with himself that he completely failed to notice two things: first, that the barking dog was getting closer all the time and second, that there was somebody sitting on the bench; until, just as he was about to seize a rather battered straw boater hat with both eager paws, a voice said almost in Bungo's horrified ear, 'And what do you think you're doing, may I ask?'

'*Eeeeep*,' said Bungo, diving under the seat and covering his ears with his paws.

'*That*,' said the voice, 'is *my* hat, I'll have you know.'

Bungo opened one eye and looked up, and into the eyes of somebody who was leaning right over the edge of the seat and looking down at him. Although the face was, of course, upside down, Bungo recognised it and his heart stopped making a loud banging noise and he said weakly, 'It was a joke.'

'*Poof!*'

'It was,' said Bungo, climbing out from under the seat and smoothing some of the grass off his fur. 'I knew it was your hat all the time, Orinoco.'

'*Poof*,' said Orinoco, who was the stoutest (and laziest) of all the Wimbledon Wombles. He sat back on the bench and put on the straw boater and tilted it over his eyes. He was also wearing sunglasses and a long overcoat – rather strained about the middle buttons – and at his side was a walking stick with a very pointed end and an extremely small paper carrier bag which was quite empty.

'I'm Bungo now,' said Bungo.

'I always like to sit in the sun,' said Orinoco, taking no notice. 'A bit of sun does you a power of good. Hallo, there's a dog coming.'

'What shall we do?' asked Bungo, starting to tremble and quite forgetting that only a short while ago he had been so brave about dogs. But then he'd only seen a small one before now, and this dog was enormous with white fur and black spots and a long tongue.

'Do? I shan't *do* anything,' said Orinoco. 'I haven't had my forty winks yet.'

Bungo looked at Orinoco, who had folded his

paws across his stomach and then at the dog, which was racing towards them, and one second later Bungo, that adventurous and fearless Womble, was running too. Across the grass he went with his ears back and his breath coming in great gasps until he reached the nearest tree and up that he clambered until he was lost among the golden yellow leaves.

The dog pranced and danced round the bottom and far up above Bungo shut his eyes and dug his claws into the wood and wished very hard indeed that he was just a young Womble again and safe deep inside the burrow.

'*Grrrrrr*,' said the Dalmatian, pawing at the tree trunk.

'Come here, Fred,' said the Dalmatian's owner, striding across the grass towards the bench where Orinoco was now gently snoring.

Much to Bungo's relief the Dalmatian shook its head and then reluctantly retreated to where its owner was about to sit down on the bench. Bungo parted the leaves and watched with his mouth open as he remembered Great Uncle Bulgaria's words of warning about mixing with Human

Beings. There was a terrible story that once long, long ago a Womble had been taken away by some men and had never been seen again. What had happened to him nobody knew and Bungo shivered so hard as he remembered this awful tale that the leaves shook gently.

'Lovely morning, sir,' said the man, sitting down and hanging on tightly to his dog's collar to stop it from sniffing round Orinoco's ankles.

'*Zzzzzz*,' said Orinoco sleepily. He was dreaming of breakfast and he scratched his stomach contentedly at the thought of food. The man moved away slightly, pulling his dog with him. The dog whined and showed his teeth and Bungo trembled so violently that some leaves drifted down off the tree.

'A very mild autumn we're having,' the man said.

'*Slup*, *slup*, *slup*,' said Orinoco, licking his lips as a picture of blackberries and cream slid before his eyes.

'Well, I must be getting along,' said the man rather nervously. '*Slup*' is a strange noise, especially when made by a stranger.

'*Oooof*,' said Orinoco, blowing out his cheeks

and having a really good scratch.

'Nice meeting you,' the man said. 'Come along then, Fred,' and he caught hold of the Dalmatian's collar and pulled him away and went off very quickly without looking back. It wasn't until he was quite out of sight that Bungo slid down the tree and then, still feeling rather shaky, went over to Orinoco and nudged him.

'Whassat?' said Orinoco, sitting bolt upright. 'Oh, it's you again. What a restless creature you are. Isn't it breakfast time yet? Where's my hat?'

'On your head,' said Bungo. 'Weren't you frightened of that man and his dog?'

'Man? What man? Dog? What dog?' said Orinoco, yawning. Then he took off his sunglasses and looked at Bungo and his eyes weren't at all sleepy as he added, 'When I've got these spectacles on there's a lot I don't see, although I'm not saying that I miss *much*. Such as young Wombles who run away from dogs . . .'

'But . . .' said Bungo, shuffling his paws.

'Or,' said Orinoco, picking up his stick, 'I might notice that my tidy-bag's rather empty while

somebody else's basket seems quite full.'

'But . . .' said Bungo and then stopped and thought for a bit. And then he sighed and picked up his basket and began to take out some of the things and to put them in the bag.

'Nothing like a nice nap in the sun to make you feel fit,' said Orinoco, shutting his eyes again.

That evening Tobermory went along to have a goodnight chat with Great Uncle Bulgaria, who was just finishing the back page of *The Times*.

'Sit down, sit down,' said Great Uncle Bulgaria, pushing over the stool. Tobermory sat down and spread out his paws to the electric fire.

'Nothing to read in the paper these days,' said Great Uncle Bulgaria, hitching his tartan shawl more firmly round his shoulders. 'Well, how's young Bungo – silly name that – how's he coming along?'

'He'll do,' said Tobermory and smiled to himself behind his paw. 'Thinks he's the greatest Womble in the world at the moment, but he'll soon get *that* knocked out of him. One way and another.'

'He's young yet,' said Great Uncle Bulgaria and for a moment the two wise old Wombles looked at

each other and then Great Uncle Bulgaria got out the chess game which he and Tobermory had been playing for years and years and quite soon both of them had forgotten all about Bungo.

And as for Bungo himself, he was fast asleep with a happy smile on his face, for he was dreaming that he was chasing an enormous black and white Dalmatian clean across Wimbledon Common while all the other Wombles watched him admiringly . . .