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Opening extract from

The Wandering Wombles

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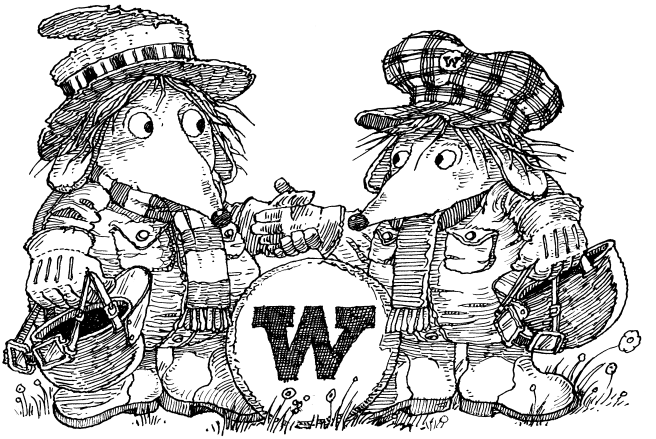

CHAPTER I

The Enormous Lorry

The trouble really started on a fine spring morning when Bungo Womble was just returning from work. He had been hard at it for most of the night tidying up his patch of Wimbledon Common and, as a party of schoolchildren had been having a Nature lesson on that very patch only the day before, there was a great deal *to* tidy up.

'Amazing, astonishing, extra-ORDINARY,' Bungo

kept muttering to himself as he picked up exercise books and papers, pencils and pens, rubbers and bits of string, gloves and caps, sweet papers and apple cores, orange rind and half-eaten sandwiches. 'Ab-so-lutely EXTRA-ordinary. I don't know how these Human Beings do it, really I don't.'

He often talked to himself while he was out on his own and, although he had been a working Womble for some while, he still hadn't got used to the fact that wherever Human Beings went they always left a trail of bits and pieces behind them. Wombles are the tidiest creatures in the world so, when Bungo saw how beautifully clean this bit of the Common now was, he felt quite proud of himself. He picked up the two very heavy baskets in which he had put all the rubbish and started back across the grass to the front door of the burrow where he lived with his 250 or so relations.

It had been a very wet spring and Bungo's paws left small flat-footed marks,* partly because he was carrying a good deal and partly because he was rather on the stout side. The sun was just starting

* Wombles usually only wear shoes or boots when they know they are meeting Human Beings.

to come out in a pale, half-hearted sort of way and the traffic was already rumbling along the roads which led into London. Even out on the Common Bungo could feel the ground shaking slightly under his paws, and then suddenly the rumbling and the shaking grew worse than ever and Bungo, who was usually quite brave, felt his mouth go dry and his wet fur stick up on end. Even the birds stopped singing and two grey squirrels, who had been shouting rude things at Bungo, shut up and became so still that they looked as if they had been carved out of the trees on which they were poised. It was as though all the creatures on the Common were holding their breath and, of them all, only Bungo had the courage to turn his head to see what was happening.

Travelling quite fast down one of the roads was the most enormous lorry he had ever seen. It was high, it was long and it was wide and it was a silver-grey in colour, and it was making so much noise that it even drowned out the rumble of a jumbo jet thundering across the sky.

'Ho-hum,' whispered Bungo, staring at the thing and shuddering in time to the shivering of

the Common. The tree under which he was standing sent down a shower of raindrops which plopped coldly on his fur and suddenly he thought how very nice it would be to be warm and safe and breakfasted down in the burrow. He took to his paws and went running off, panting and snorting until he reached the bushes where the front door was carefully hidden.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo,' said Tomsk, the Nightwatch Womble who was on duty, ticking off the names of returning working Wombles. 'Is it thundering up there?'

'Sort of,' said Bungo, shaking himself violently and then wiping his feet on a mat made of plaited reeds picked from Queen's Mere, a lake on Wimbledon Common.

'What do you mean – sort of?' asked Tomsk, thinking this over. 'It either IS thundering or it isn't. Isn't it?'

But Bungo had already picked up his baskets and gone hurrying off to report to the Workshop where Tobermory was sorting out the things brought in by other working Wombles. Nothing was ever thrown away as useless; even torn paper

bags and old bus tickets were put into buckets and soaked with water so that they turned into a really delightful messy kind of stuff. Tobermory always kept one small bucketful for his own use, as mixed with a little cement powder* it was just right for filling in cracks. But most of it went to the Womblegarten where the very small Wombles learnt how to make it into bowls or plates or, more often than not, into rather peculiarly shaped ornaments and toys. It was great fun to do and Miss Adelaide Womble, who ran the Womblegarten, knew that it also taught them how to use their paws neatly.

'My word, you HAVE been busy,' said Tobermory, sticking his pencil behind one ear and putting down his list. 'That's a fine collection of objects, young Bungo. A nice lot of books too, I see. They'll be pleased to get them in the library – always complaining that they're short of books. Off you go to your breakfast then, you've earned it. Nasty thunderstorm that, wasn't it?'

'It wasn't thunder exactly,' said Bungo, putting

* Tobermory had one sack of cement powder left over from the 'Concrete Mixer Expedition', see *The Wombles.*

up a paw to hide a yawn.

But Tobermory was sorting through the baskets and putting the things into little heaps while he made a clicking noise with his tongue. So Bungo went off to have a wash and brush-down and then he trotted off to the Common Room where his friend, Orinoco, who was always first in for meals, was keeping a place for him. They stood shuffling and whispering behind their stools until Great Uncle Bulgaria, the oldest and most important Womble of them all, appeared in the doorway and then everybody stood to attention and kept quiet while he made his way slowly to the top table. His fur had turned snow-white with age and he felt the cold a bit these days, so he was wearing his tartan shawl. The moment he sat down, so did everybody else and Great Uncle Bulgaria looked at all their hungry, hopeful faces through his large round spectacles and said, 'Before we start eating there's something I want to ask you.'

Orinoco gave a low moan, for he was aching to begin his breakfast and the smell of fried toad-stools which was wafting through from the

kitchen was making his stomach rumble. Great Uncle Bulgaria looked at him over the top of his spectacles and Orinoco tried hard to pretend that it wasn't him who had made the noise.

'Something I want to ask you,' repeated Great Uncle Bulgaria. 'Who was it who was making all that din up and down the passages this morning?'

There was absolute silence while Great Uncle Bulgaria looked at face after face, his white fur wrinkled into a frown. Wombles don't tell lies, but keeping quiet about something is rather different and everybody soon began to glance at his or her neighbour, hoping they'd own up quickly so that breakfast could start.

'Noise? Noise?' said Tobermory, coming into the Common Room still smoothing down his grey fur – he was only a few years younger than Great Uncle Bulgaria and in a few years would be just as white. 'Noise in the passages? I think it came from outside. Must have been thunder. Bungo was the last to report in – he'd know.'

'Please,' said Bungo, 'it wasn't thunder exactly.'

'What do you mean, not exactly?' asked the oldest Womble.

'Well, it was *like* thunder only it wasn't up in the sky. It was on the new road that leads to Tibbet's Corner.'

Several of the youngest Wombles drew closer together at this frightening idea and Great Uncle Bulgaria's frown deepened.

'Please explain yourself clearly,' he demanded.

'And get on with it, do,' whispered Orinoco out of the corner of his mouth. He would probably faint from starvation in about two minutes, he was sure.

Bungo cleared his throat.

'The noise came from a lorry. A really enormous, ENORMOUS lorry. It was as big as – as big as this room and the kitchen and the Playroom and the Workshop all put together and much higher. It made the Common tremble up and down. It was . . .'

'Enormous,' said Great Uncle Bulgaria. 'Very odd. It even made the burrow shake a bit. Well, I don't suppose it'll happen again. Very well, you may start . . .'

But even as he spoke, the rumbling did start again. It was muffled now by the ground above



them, yet it still made the mugs and plates jump on the table and all the knives, forks and spoons jingled. Great Uncle Bulgaria's spectacles jiggled up and down on his nose too and one of the very youngest Wombles giggled nervously.

'Start breakfast,' said Great Uncle Bulgaria very loudly and picked up his knife and fork. The rumbling was drowned out by the noise of stools being scraped nearer the table and an instant hum of conversation, for they all hated having to keep quiet even for a few seconds.

'I don't like it,' said Great Uncle Bulgaria in a low voice to Tobermory. 'There's far too much noise these days out in the world. When I was young you could stand on the Common at dawn and listen to the birds sing. If you try the same thing today, you can't hear a thrush four feet away because of all that dratted traffic.'

'And it'll get worse,' said Tobermory gloomily. 'Hold on a minute, I found a piece in the paper only yesterday.' And he put his paw into the big pocket in the front of his apron and brought out a cutting. 'Yes, here we are. Transport Minister said yesterday in the House of Commons, mumble, mumble, go forward into the future of this new technological age – what a ridiculous word – with better means of, mumble, mumble, ah – containerisation. There!'

'I'm no wiser,' said Great Uncle Bulgaria, mopping up the last of his fried toadstools with a piece of wheatgrass bread.

'I'm not too sure about it myself,' admitted Tobermory, 'but roughly what it boils down to is that goods come to this country in extremely large packing cases, which are then put on these

extremely large lorries down at the docks. These lorries are called containers. Because they contain things you see and . . .'

'I'm not a complete fool,' said Great Uncle Bulgaria, feeling rather irritated. 'I get the general idea and what it boils down to, my friend, is that lorries are getting larger and more noisy and now that they've built that new highway, we shall get more than our fair share of them.'

'Can't be helped,' said Tobermory. 'We'll just have to put up with them like the Human Beings do. Perhaps we could wear earmuffs.' And he began to scribble a few pictures of earmuffs on the pad he always kept in his apron pocket.

Great Uncle Bulgaria snorted and went on with his breakfast. He knew that the burrow would stand a great deal of shaking since Tobermory had reinforced it some while ago, but all the same it was not pleasant to look into the future and to realise that from now on they would all have to get used to living with this rumbling roar. So, as soon as breakfast was over, he went back to his own cosy little room and wrapped the shawl more tightly round his shoulders and put his old paws

up on a stool and slowly rocked backwards and forwards. He didn't even bother to pick up *The Times* (yesterday's edition), which showed how deeply worried he was.

'Perhaps,' he muttered to himself at last, 'perhaps the Human Beings will have the sense to stop all this container-whatsit nonsense. If it's bad for us it must be a lot worse for them up above ground. They won't be able to hear themselves think – if they ever do think, that is. Yes, they'll put a stop to it.'

He was quite wrong, which was unusual for him, as during the next few days the noise got steadily worse and some of the more nervous young Wombles began having nightmares and losing their fur. Even Orinoco, usually the most placid of creatures, became quite upset when, just as he was about to take a lick of dandelion ice cream in a cornet, one of the lorries thundered past and shook the ice cream clean out of the cornet and down Orinoco's fat stomach.

'This is too much,' he said crossly, trying to bend down far enough to lick up the sticky mess. 'Somebody'll have to *do* something.'

Which was exactly what Great Uncle Bulgaria was saying at the same moment to Tobermory: 'We'll have to take action.'

'What sort of action?' asked Tobermory. 'I could make a barrier, I suppose, and put it up across the road, but that would only stop these container-thingummies for a short time.'

'No, that's no good.'

'Or there are the earmuffs,' suggested Tobermory who was rather taken with this idea.

'No, no, *that's* no good. We shouldn't be able to hear each other talk.'

'What then?'

Great Uncle Bulgaria sat up very straight and looked his old friend steadily in the face.

'We shall have to move,' he said simply.

'Move? Us? But we've lived under Wimbledon Common for hundreds of years. There've been burrows here since any Womble can remember. Move! It's unthinkable.'

'Have you got a better idea?' asked Great Uncle Bulgaria, making a grab for his spectacles as the room shuddered and his spectacles with them.

There was a long pause while Tobermory

scratched his ear with his screwdriver and scowled at the wall. Like his friend, he had spent all his long life in the area of Wimbledon and the thought of leaving it was extremely upsetting.

'No,' he admitted at last, 'I haven't. But I don't like it. I don't like it at all. Besides which, where could we possibly go?'

'Ah-HA,' said Great Uncle Bulgaria, getting stiffly to his feet. 'Exactly, precisely, where? I'm coming to that. Follow me.'

'Where to?' asked Tobermory, who was still dazed by what had been suggested.

'To the library,' replied Great Uncle Bulgaria, who now he had got used to his own astonishing plan was rather starting to enjoy the excitement of it. It made him feel quite middle-aged again. 'Come along, come along. We must start planning the whole operation at once. There's not a moment to lose. We shall take to the open road, old friend, to look for fresh fields and pastures new. In fact, *that* is what I shall call the whole affair, OPERATION WANDERING WOMBLE. OWW for short. From now on you will refer to this business as OWW until I issue an official

statement. Well, are you coming or are you going to sit there all day with your mouth open?'

And Great Uncle Bulgaria went hobbling out of the door at a surprising speed for one of his age, leaving Tobermory, his mouth still open, to follow him.