

*The World in the Walls*

Book I of Fillory and Further

Chapter 1: The Wonderful Clock

Martin Chatwin was not an ordinary boy, but he thought that he was. In fact he was unusually clever and brave and kind for his age, he just didn't know it. Martin thought that he was just an ordinary boy who lived in a rather nice but otherwise ordinary house in London, with two nice parents and four nice but occasionally absolutely infuriating brothers and sisters, and that was the end of it.

I find that this is very often the case. Extraordinary people tend to think that they're ordinary, and the reverse is true as well -- the world is filled with people who believe that they are special and unusual, when in fact they are mediocre in every possible respect.

But even Martin would admit that what happened to him at his Aunt Maude's house was out of the ordinary, if you asked him, which I'm sorry to say that you cannot do. But let's not get ahead of ourselves -- it hasn't even happened yet.

When our story begins Martin isn't living in London. He and the other Chatwin children—Fiona, Rupert, Helen and Jane—have been sent to Cornwall to live with their Aunt Maude, who was Mrs. Chatwin's sister. Why this should have happened is difficult to explain, and Martin himself wasn't at all sure that it had been properly explained to him. Apparently his father had gone away to fight the Germans at place called Passchendaele, which he could just about pronounce but not spell, and why the Germans needed fighting at all in the first place was very unclear. Meanwhile in his father's absence his mother had become exhausted and had gone away to a place in the country that was supposed to be very quiet and restful, where she could recover in peace.

More than that Martin couldn't get out of the adults he asked. Even though they looked at him very kindly and comfortingly, they were very stingy when it came to giving out actual information, as adults often are.

The house to which Martin and his siblings had been sent, Aunt Maude's house, was in one of those tiny villages in north Cornwall that seem to exist by accident, tumbled in with huge boulders and rugged hills and old stone circles erected a long time ago by nobody is precisely sure who. The house was very grand -- three stories tall, with a façade made of brick and stone, and enormous windows, and endless numbers of fireplaces and window seats and curving back stairs and other advantages which the Chatwins' London house distinctly lacked. Among those advantages were the sprawling grounds around the house, which included long straight allees and white gravel paths and dark green pools of grass.

When I first met the Chatwin children they were arranged around the edge of a round fountain in back of Maude's house, collars turned up and hands thrust in their coat pockets against the icy wind, trying to make some sense of their new surroundings. It was a chilly afternoon in late October, and I can only assume they'd been driven outside by

that feeling of boredom and restlessness for the sake of which children will endure almost any discomfort. My own house was a mile or so away, closer to the village, and I had come over to make arrangements with Maude about the hunt next weekend, but she was not at home, and to be completely honest I was a little out of sorts at having made the trip for nothing.

The Chatwins were out of sorts too, or maybe it would be more accurate to say that they were both in and out of sorts at the same time -- if you've ever had that happen you'll know exactly what I mean. They missed their mother, and they were terribly worried about their father, but they were also very excited about their new situation -- grand old house, a bare minimum of lessons, a crackle of important events in the air -- and they also felt a bit guilty about feeling so excited, so they weren't sure whether they were feeling happy or unhappy or excited or guilty, and in the end they felt a bit of each all at once.

The eldest Chatwin -- who was 11, and who I did not know yet was named Martin -- sized me up warily, as if he thought I might try to deprive him of his newfound kingdom.

"Who are you?" he said, not entirely politely. His face was sharp with precocious intelligence.

"My name's Plover," I replied. "I came to see Maude, but she isn't here. Who are you?"

"I'm Martin. I'm Maude's nephew. These are Fiona, Rupert, Helen and Jane. Jane's the littlest, she won't talk to anyone who wears whiskers, so try not to be offended. Rupes will talk your ears off, but you don't have to listen. I never do."

"I see," I said, and I imagine that I did. I didn't feel offended at all. They were a curious little tribe, who'd obviously spent a lot of time looking after each other. You wouldn't ever catch them saying or doing anything openly affectionate, or even particularly acknowledging one another's existence, but at the same time a current of absolute loyalty ran between them, as if even then they shared some momentous secret.

"When do you suppose your aunt will be at home?" I asked. "I need to speak with her about the arrangements for the hunt." (I'm sorry for repeating myself, but that is what I said, as Martin didn't know it yet.)

"We don't know. No one ever tells us anything. If you like I'll help you with the hunt, I'm very good with horses. Everyone says so."

"I don't," his sister Fiona said lightly. "So not everyone does."

"Martin's got a big head because he came second at jumping at school," Rupert said. "I'm not allowed to jump yet," he added, as if I'd demanded clarification on that point. "What's your horse's name? Do you do ride a great deal?"

Little Jane merely regarded her reflection in the water with an air of melancholy thoughtfulness that seemed beyond her years. The fountain had absolutely monstrous goldfish swimming in it, and she was so small I worried that an enterprising fish might seize her by the hand and try to drag her under. Helen watched Jane watching herself, as if it were on the tip of her tongue to remind her that vanity was a sin.

"Buttons, and yes," I said, and made my excuses. I really did need to find Maude.

I next saw Martin and his brothers and sisters the following weekend, on the day of the hunt. I wasn't planning on going out, and neither was Maude. She wasn't mad

about hunting, nor was she mad about being a mother to her sister's children, but she was exceptionally good at giving parties, so that's what she did. She was so good at it that almost nobody bothered with much actual hunting anymore. Hardly anyone even wore red. When I arrived, well-dressed individuals of all descriptions were posed in flattering attitudes around the first floor of the house and on the rear terrace.

Maude herself was in full cry and looking very sleek in a black dress well set off by a single long rope of pearls. The talk was mostly of the war—not being in it, everybody wanted to look as if they knew what it was like for those who were, and they wanted everyone else to know they had very good reasons for not being in it.

As a single man of what might charitably be ruled early middle age, I was something of an anomaly at the Maude's parties. But I was not as much of an anomaly as the five Chatwin children. After the first hour they were bored of all the grown-up talk, even the grown-up talk that was intended to interest them, and they had stolen all of the hors-d'oeuvres that any self-respecting child could plausibly bring him or herself to eat. So naturally they slipped away up one of the curving back staircases to see what they could see.

I only learned much later of the adventures that befell them there. Of course I wasn't there myself -- these are the kinds of adventures grown-ups cannot go on. But Martin and the other Chatwins told me all about them later on, and I will tell you exactly what they told me.

Martin had a hobby, one that interested him and bored his younger siblings so intensely that it sometimes reduced little Jane to tears. His hobby was clockwork: he loved taking apart and then re-assembling the mechanisms of watches and clocks and little wind-up toys, though admittedly he was better at the first half of the operation than the second. A few days earlier he had encountered a truly stupendous specimen in a back corridor of one of the upper floors of his aunt's house. It was a grandfather clock, a really wonderful timepiece with a face lavishly adorned with dials and numbers and zodiacal symbols, designed to keep track not only of the time of day but the months of the year and the seasons and the phases of the moon and goodness knows what else. Martin knew what else, and what he didn't know he was determined to find out.

While Fiona and Rupert and Helen and Jane looked on, in various states of near-fatal ennui, Martin stared at the clock, observing the movements of its hands, until he was confident that he understood what function each of them was intended to perform. Only then did he gently open the glass case that covered its face.

"Martin, no," Fiona said. "You'll break it."

"I won't."

"You know he won't, Fi," Helen said.

"But what if he does? We'll all be blamed."

"Martin could knock it over and stamp it to pieces and Aunt Maude wouldn't notice," Rupert said. "I doubt she's been up here in 10 years. I don't think she's interested in this sort of thing. She probably doesn't even know it's here."

At that moment, as if to make his case for him, someone downstairs began playing the piano and singing a tipsy chorus.

"Somebody must come up here to wind the thing, anyway," Fiona said. And it was true, the clock was ticking and tocking along heartily.

“It’s immaterial,” Martin said, never taking his eye off his quarry. He had discovered that he could use words like that correctly, and he loved doing it. “I won’t break it. Bother, I can’t get at the works this way.”

He closed the glass case and turned his attention to the large wooden cabinet that made up the body of the clock. But it was locked. He felt around for a key -- in his experience they were generally left on top of the item in question -- but whoever was in charge of winding the clock had kept the key for him or herself.

While Martin pondered this new setback, silent Jane stole forward. Removing two pins from her hair, she pushed them in the keyhole of the cabinet. She spent the next minute quietly manipulating them, pushing and nudging the hidden tumblers in ways the others couldn’t see. Then the lock clicked open.

She withdrew again, without a word.

“Thanks, Janey,” Martin muttered, abashed. He had long since learned that he could never, ever know what to expect from his youngest sister.

Martin thought he knew what to expect from clocks -- it was one of the things he liked most about them. When he opened the door he did the first thing he always did when he was trying to disassemble a complicated, expensive, forbidden device: he stopped it, in this case by taking the pendulum in his hand and preventing it from swinging. Once he had done so he was surprised for the second time in the span of a minute: the clock continued to tick along happily, oblivious to the fact that there was no obvious way it could justify doing so.

Now, Martin liked things that came with explanations, and of late he had been experiencing a marked shortage of them. But he was not easily daunted. After all, since the war began he had become, not just the father of his little family, but for all intents and purposes a widower at the age of 11. A newfangled technique for driving clockwork was not about to stop him in his tracks. He proceeded -- as any English boy in his position would have done -- to stick his head inside the clock.

But now there was another thing that demanded explaining, or three things to be exact: the gentle breeze that issued from the open cabinet, and the smell of sweet grass that it carried with it, and the sound of a whinnying horse and the clash of arms.

I wish now that I could have been there, to tell him to turn back. But I didn’t know then what I know now, and in any case I was downstairs playing “I’m Always Chasing Rainbows” on the piano, and not very well at that. And even if I had told him, no force in this world or any other could have held Martin back from his destiny at that moment.