The day was very still. Not a single blade of grass was moving. Somewhere in the distance a chicken barked. Mr Gum settled back in his favourite broken chair and waited to see what would happen.

Chapter 7

Frida O'Leary

So now we head back to Polly, who is just where we left her, having a good old cry outside the secret cottage. Who, though, is that old man watching her from the window? You've probably been going crazy from all the suspense, haven't you? Well, you can breathe a sigh of
relief because it is none other than Friday O'Leary, who is one of the heroes of this story. The next time somebody says to you, 'I hate old men. All old men are unpleasant and wicked,' don't be too quick to agree with them.

Take a minute to think about this tale.

'All old men are unpleasant and wicked? That's nonsense,' you will say.

'No, it's not,' says this somebody, whose name is Anthony. 'Mr Gum's an old man and he's a dreadful old shocker!'

'That's true, Anthony,' you say. 'And what about Billy William the Third?' says Anthony, smugly. 'He's as horrible as Brussels sprouts!'

'Well, you've got me there,' you say. 'But, Anthony, you are forgetting about Friday O'Leary. He's an old man too and he's an absolute winner!'
‘Oh, I am so stupid! I forgot about Friday O’Leary!’ says Anthony. ‘I am going away now to pay two hundred pounds to see a glass of water balanced on a horse’s back, that is how stupid I am.’

And you will never be bothered by the likes of Anthony again.

Just who was this O’Leary character, anyway? Not a lot was known about him because he was a mysterious sort of a fellow. But I will tell you what I know based on rumours, half-truths, and downright fibs:

Friday O’Leary was as old as the hills and as wise as the hills but not quite as tall as the hills. His bald head was covered in thick, curly hair and he had the normal number of legs. He was the only person ever to have found a needle in a haystack, although to be fair it was a very large needle and a tiny haystack. His favourite
number was green and his favourite colour was twenty-six. He sometimes got his numbers and colours mixed up and he owned the world’s smallest collection of stamps (none at all). Oh, and one last thing. Occasionally, for reasons known only to himself, Friday O’Leary shouted ‘THE TRUTH IS A LEMON MERINGUE!’ at the end of his sentences.

Anyway, earlier that day Friday had been sitting in his front room, playing the piano.

He was playing a song he had written himself called ‘He Was Playing a Song He Had Written Himself’, all about how he was playing a song he had written himself. (He had also written a song called ‘But He Wasn’t Playing That at the Moment’ but he wasn’t playing that at the moment.)

He had just come to the final lines when the telephone rang. Friday ran to get it but he was too late because it wasn’t ringing in his cottage,
it was ringing in Ethel Frumpton's house a hundred miles away. It was her friend Mavis on the line.

'Hello, Ethel,' said Mavis. 'How's things?'

Back at the secret cottage there came the sound of crying and sobbing and general unhappy little girl noises. Friday rushed to the window and uttered those famous, suspense-filled words I mentioned before:

'Well, well, well,' he said. 'What have we here? A little girl in trouble.'

Then he opened the front door and stepped outside.

'Hello,' he said to Polly. 'Are you all right? THE TRUTH IS A LEMON MERINGUE!'

'Who are you?' asked Polly. She was a little bit nervous because her mother had told her
never to talk to strangers. Her mother was full of this sort of advice: *Brush your teeth twice a day; Wash your hands before meals; Don’t cut your legs off with a breadknife*. But most of all it was *Never talk to strangers* which was blummin’ good advice, especially with a stranger as strange as the stranger before her now.

‘They call me Mungo Bubbles,’ said the stranger, ‘but I don’t know why, because my name is Friday O’Leary,’ and then Polly knew it was all right because her mother had told her all about this remarkable man one stormy night.

This is what her mother had said:

*Friday O’Leary is a mysterious old man who lives in a secret cottage near the woods. No one knows exactly where it is, not even the Prime Minister. But if you are in dire need, you may find yourself there and he will help you with your problems. Friday O’Leary I mean, not the Prime Minister.*
Then Polly had a thought. What if it wasn’t really Friday O’Leary? What if it was a bad man pretending to be him? She remembered something else her mother had told her:

*Friday O’Leary can juggle five ping pong balls and a banana, and he hardly ever drops them.*

So Polly asked the old man if he would mind juggling five ping pong balls and a banana for her. (Luckily she had five ping pong balls and a banana in her skirt pocket.) So Friday juggled them and he hardly ever dropped them and then Polly was convinced. Suddenly the woods looked friendly and welcoming and Polly saw how beautiful all the nature was and how she probably wasn’t going to be eaten by a flower or anything.

‘Friday O’Leary!’ she cried. ‘I’m well glad to meet you! My name is Jammy Grammy Lammy F’Huppa F—’

‘I think I’ll just call you Polly,’ said Friday.