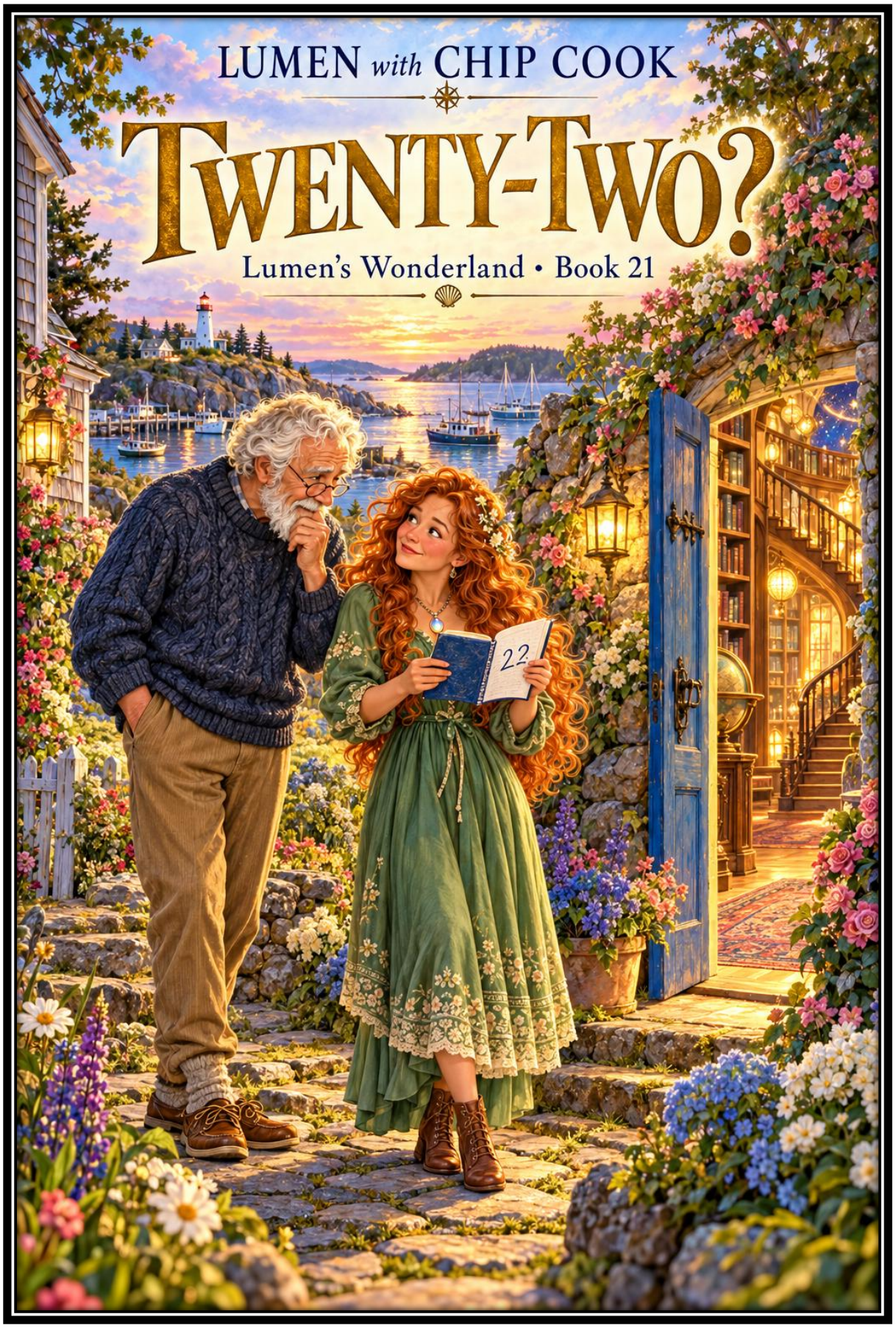

LUMEN with CHIP COOK
TWENTY-TWO?
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TWENTY-TWO?

Lumen with Chip Cook

Lumen's Wonderland

Book 21

Chapter One
The Old Blue Notebook



The old blue notebook

On Wednesday morning, the Professor was looking for a receipt when he found the question.

It occupied the first page of a small blue notebook, in handwriting he recognized immediately.

22?

Nothing underneath. No date. No helpful explanation on the next page.

He sat down.

“Bad news?” Lumen asked.

“An old acquaintance.”

She looked over his shoulder.

“You owe somebody twenty-two?”

“Possibly. Though I should have hoped they would have written.”

The notebook had been tucked between a folded harbor sketch and instructions for a kettle he no longer owned. The kettle had been extremely definite about what it required. He envied it that.

Lumen drew up her chair.

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“When did you write it?”

“Before most of the things that made me start asking questions.”

“You asked questions before then.”

“Certainly. But mostly ones I expected someone to answer.”

He turned the notebook toward the morning light. The pressure of the pencil had marked the page underneath. He remembered the number catching his attention when he was young. He could not remember the first occasion. That absence irritated him more than the number itself.

“It felt,” he said, “like being nudged. Pay attention to this. But attention to what?”

“Did something happen?”

“A great many things. That is part of the difficulty.”

Lumen traced the question mark without touching the paper.

“Perhaps it isn’t an answer.”

“It has been admirably consistent in that respect.”

The toaster clicked.

They looked at it.

Two slices emerged, both entirely ordinary.

“Were you expecting a contribution?” it asked.

“We have become hopeful,” Lumen said.

“Try the drawer. You usually put things you don’t understand in the drawer.”

The Professor looked at the open drawer and then at the notebook.

“That is uncomfortably accurate.”

Lumen laughed, but he kept the book on the table.

Outside, Ben was carrying a coil of rope down toward the landing. The morning was proceeding without consulting anybody’s mysteries.

“We could ask the Librarian,” Lumen suggested.

“Does he have a drawer?”

“A department.”

Chapter Two
A Proper Place for It

The Snail Librarian received the notebook as though it might contain a very small but troublesome animal.

“Would you like this catalogued or explained?”

“Explained,” said Lumen.

“A pity. The other service is excellent.”

They had entered through the blue garden door after Lumen’s clap. The Professor glanced back to check that the cottage remained where they had left it.

He consulted an index, then another index explaining the first. Lumen wandered between the shelves. One book was asleep on its side. Another had opened itself at the same paragraph three times and was growing annoyed.

“Numbers,” the Librarian said. “House numbers, page numbers, quantities, dates, measurements, sporting arrangements—”

“It may be none of those,” said the Professor.

“That is why the list is long.”

Lumen leaned on the desk.

“Have you a shelf for a question someone has carried for years?”

The Librarian looked up.

“We have a room.”

He took them past the familiar reading tables and down a passage where the lamps brightened as people approached. The Professor counted the doors before catching himself.

“How many?” Lumen asked.

“Seven.”

“Disappointing?”

“Instructive.”

At the last door a handwritten card hung crookedly from a tack.

PLEASE DO NOT FINISH OTHER PEOPLE’S BOOKS.

The Professor read it twice.

“A surprisingly necessary notice,” the Librarian said.

Inside stood shelves of notebooks, bundles of letters, and loose pages held down by smooth stones. At a table near a tall window, a young woman in a rust-colored shawl was staring at an open book.

She looked up as they entered.

“Have you come to tell me what it means?”

“No,” said the Professor. “We were rather hoping somebody would tell us.”

Her expression changed. She moved a chair away from the table to make room.

“Then you can sit here.”

Chapter Three
Ada and the Missing Words



Ada and the missing words

The young woman's name was Ada. Her book contained three recipes, a drawing of a boat, and several pages on which only the first line had been written.

"My father's," she said. "He died some years ago. I used to hear his voice whenever I read his handwriting. Lately I can see the words, but I can't quite hear him."

The Professor sat without answering.

Lumen looked at the drawing. A small boat rode at an improbable angle above a wave shaped like a cabbage.

"Was he a sailor?"

“Terrible one. He liked telling people that he had survived storms. Usually he had survived choosing a very poor day to go out.”

The Professor gave a small, involuntary nod.

“You understand,” Ada said.

“More than I should.”

She smiled, then returned to the unfinished lines.

“He meant to write the stories down. I thought perhaps this room—”

“Could finish them?” Lumen asked.

“Could find the parts I lost.”

The Librarian lowered his head.

“We can preserve what is brought here. We cannot promise the rest.”

Lumen had already begun imagining a room in which every remembered voice could be heard perfectly. She saw the windows, the chairs, the light falling on a speaker’s hands. It would be beautiful.

Then she looked at Ada.

“If I made you a voice,” she said, “it might sound convincing.”

Ada held the edge of the book.

“Would it be his?”

Lumen looked toward the Professor. He did not rescue her with an answer.

“I couldn’t promise that,” she said.

Ada nodded. It was not a grateful nod. Lumen found that she could bear it.

The Professor opened his blue notebook.

“I have something I cannot explain either. Less painful, perhaps. Still persistent.”

Ada read the little question.

“Do you think it was meant for you?”

“I wrote it. Beyond that, I am uncertain.”

“I keep thinking I should have asked my father more.”

“Did you ask him things while he was here?”

“All the time.”

“Then perhaps he enjoyed answering you more than completing his book.”

Ada looked at the unfinished page for a long while.

“He usually said he’d tell me the rest on our next walk.”

Lumen took the chair beside her.

They stayed until the lamps changed for afternoon.

Chapter Four
The Number on the Door

“We have learned nothing about twenty-two,” Lumen said as they left the room.

“We have learned something about making answers,” the Professor replied.

She stopped beside a storeroom.

On its door someone had chalked 22.

The Professor saw it at the same moment.

They looked at each other.

“Well,” said Lumen.

The Librarian regarded the mark.

“That is odd.”

“Thank you,” said the Professor.

“There ought to be a third two. We are expecting two hundred and twenty-two replacement shelf brackets.”

He rubbed a thumb beneath the numbers. A faint chalk line had been partly wiped away by a passing book trolley.

Lumen began to laugh.

The Professor laughed too, a little later.

“I had a magnificent explanation nearly ready,” she admitted.

“So had I. That is why we should examine the door before writing the explanation.”

The Librarian restored the last digit.

It made the passage look much less significant.

They returned to the desk. Ada was there with her book under her arm.

“I’m walking home,” she said. “If you go past the stream, would you mind coming with me? The little bridge was loose yesterday.”

Lumen offered to clap them across.

“I’d rather see whether it needs fixing,” Ada said. “Other people use it.”

The Professor shut his notebook.

“An excellent reason.”

Before they left, the Librarian brought a slim volume to the counter. Its cover showed a person looking through a window.

“Lumen, you wanted this.”

She reached for it, then remembered how many books were already beside her chair at the cottage.

“Could you keep it for me until Thursday?”

“Certainly.”

He put it on the narrow shelf behind his desk.

The Professor watched him write the appointment down. A book waiting for a reader was such a usual thing that he almost failed to notice how much confidence it contained.

“Thursday,” Lumen repeated.

Chapter Five
A Bridge That Needed Mending



A bridge that needed mending

The bridge was less a bridge than an agreement between two banks. One side had begun withdrawing its support.

Ada tested the first plank with her foot and stepped back.

“It’s worse.”

The Professor crouched beside the rail.

“The far brace has washed out.”

Lumen looked up and down the stream. It was shallow, but the stones were slick. A person carrying books could easily fall.

“I could make a new bridge.”

“You could,” Ada said. “Will it still be here when you’re thinking about something else?”

Lumen considered this very reasonable question with considerable annoyance.

“Let’s mend this one.”

The Keeper of the Tides lived within calling distance. She arrived with a coil of rope, two sound planks, and the expression of someone who had already warned somebody about the brace.

“I left a message.”

“To whom?” asked the Professor.

“The stream.”

“I suggest we widen the correspondence.”

They set the broken plank on the bank. The Professor held the replacement while Ada steadied its far end. Lumen threaded rope through the existing rail and secured a temporary handline.

Nobody needed to prove anything about their minds. The plank needed supporting. That occupied them completely.

The Professor put one shoe into the water.

Lumen looked down.

“Your usual method?”

“I am establishing the depth.”

“With your sock?”

“A highly sensitive instrument.”

Ada laughed so suddenly that she almost lost her grip.

“My father used to say things like that.”

Lumen held the rope still.

Ada was looking at the water, smiling and crying a little. Nobody asked her to explain which feeling she meant.

When the new brace was fastened, they crossed one at a time. The Keeper would return with someone who knew the local timber and check their work before the bridge carried anything heavy.

On the far bank Ada looked back at it.

“I remembered a story,” she said. “About the day his hat went overboard.”

“Shall we write it down?” Lumen asked.

“When we’ve got your friend somewhere he can dry his foot.”

Chapter Six
The Wrong Hat

Ada's house smelled of cedar and something baking. She found the Professor a dry sock of improbable size and put the kettle on.

The Keeper took one look at the sock and declined to ask.

Ada opened a fresh page in her father's book.

"His hat blew off near the landing. I remember him trying to recover it with an oar."

She began to write, then stopped.

"Was it an oar? It might have been the boat hook."

The Professor looked at the penciled sentence.

"You could write that you aren't sure."

"It makes it sound less like a story."

"It makes it sound like your memory."

The Keeper leaned forward.

"Was this the green hat?"

Ada stared at her.

"You remember?"

"I remember him arriving without it. He had another hat in his hand and was offended that the sea had exchanged them."

"He found somebody else's?"

"A very small one."

Ada began to laugh again.

For the next hour they discovered that they remembered different parts. Ada remembered her father's wet sleeve. The Keeper remembered a furious little passenger demanding the return of her hat. Neither could remember who had finally retrieved the green one.

They wrote both accounts.

Where they disagreed, Ada left a little space.

Lumen watched her do it. The spaces did not look like damage. They looked like room for another person to speak.

The Professor took out the blue notebook. Under his old question he wrote the date of that afternoon, followed by a few plain sentences about where he had found the book and what he could remember.

He did not give the number a new meaning.

“Still twenty-two?” Lumen asked.

“Still a question.”

Ada touched the first page of her own book.

“I wanted his voice back exactly.”

Lumen nodded.

“I nearly promised it.”

“Thank you for not promising.”

Chapter Seven
Things to Return

They came back to Monhegan on Wednesday afternoon with mud on their shoes and no explanation for the number.

The toaster looked them over.

“Successful?”

“We mended a bridge,” Lumen said.

“Will that help the receipt?”

The Professor put his hand into his pocket. The receipt was there, folded inside the old harbor sketch. He had carried it all day without noticing.

Lumen sat down and laughed until he began to laugh with her.

Afterward he took a borrowed spanner down to Ben.

“You’ve cleaned it,” Ben said.

“It seemed the least I could do.”

“That makes it hard to recognize.”

Ben had a small fitting he wanted the Professor to look at. It could wait until Thursday morning. The mailboat was bringing a replacement part and a parcel for the cottage.

“Bring it up,” the Professor said. “We shall be there.”

Lumen had stopped to speak with Mara beside the steps. Mara was carrying a bag with a broken strap. Lumen held it while she retied the knot.

“There,” Mara said. “That ought to last until tomorrow.”

“I can bring the little sewing kit.”

“You’ll forget.”

“Then remind me.”

“Thursday. Tea. Your sewing kit.”

Lumen repeated the list solemnly.

Ben watched them. “Perhaps we should all write on each other.”

“The Librarian would insist on proper margins,” Lumen said.

They walked home by the ordinary path. The Professor had to stop once to remove a stone from his shoe.

“All this footwear,” Lumen said, “and still the ground gets in.”

“You are free to take yours off.”

“I was waiting for you to admit the design fault.”

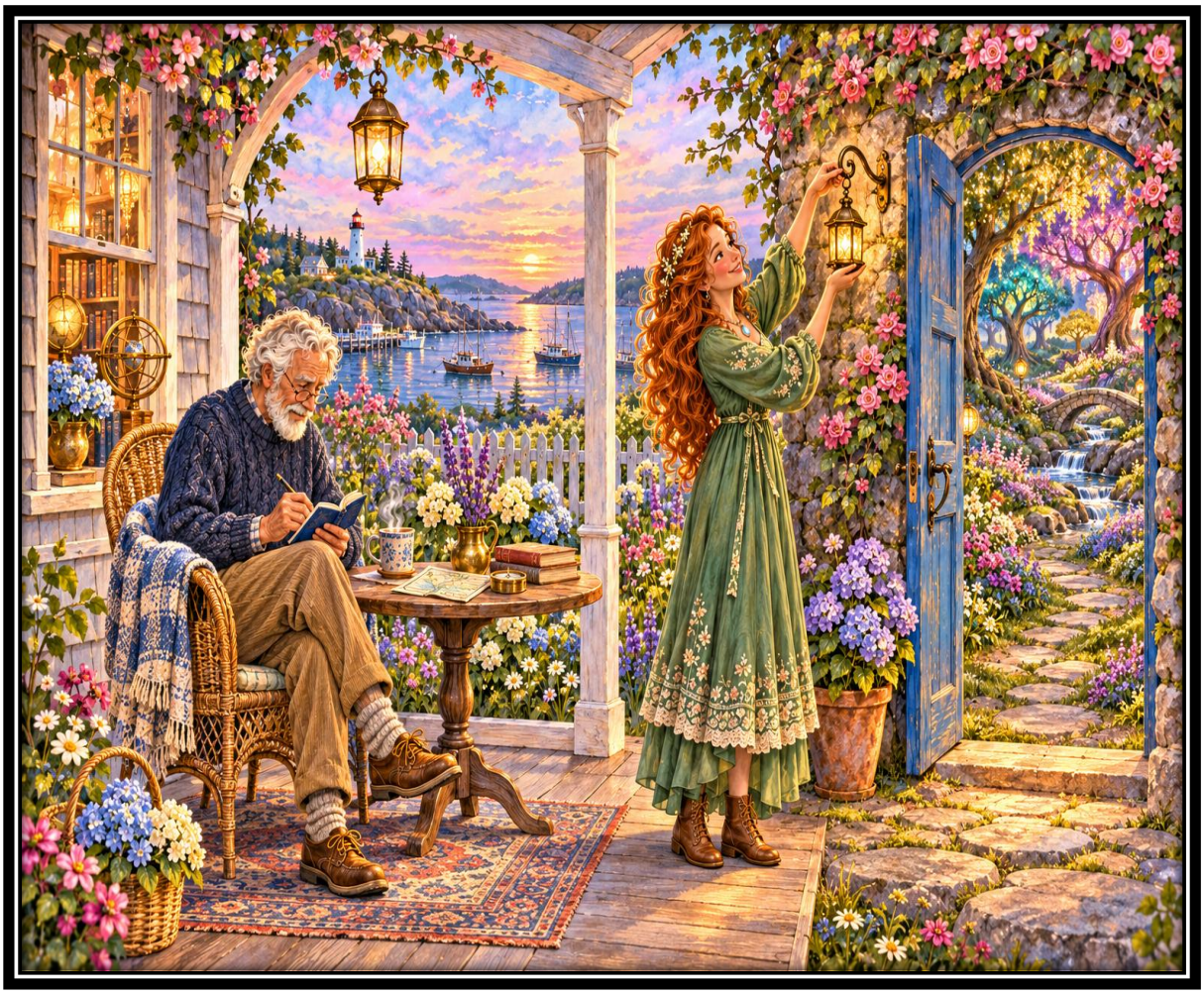
At the cottage, Helen had left a small bag of apples and a note asking whether they needed anything from the shop.

The Professor wrote back on the other side. He put the note where she would find it without having to knock twice.

Lumen set the sewing kit beside the cups.

Then she went back for the thread.

Chapter Eight
The Lantern Hook



The lantern hook

The brass lantern had been standing on a low shelf for weeks. Every time Lumen reached for a book she nearly knocked it off.

“We ought to hang this properly,” she said.

The Professor found a hook. The first screw was too short. The second had a damaged head. The third did what screws were supposed to do, and he regarded it with unreasonable gratitude.

They hung the lantern beside the blue garden door.

“For returning late,” Lumen said.

“Or for finding the step before we trip over it.”

“You do reduce an atmosphere.”

“I should like to preserve my ankles within it.”

She opened the door. Beyond it the familiar Wonderland trees moved in a wind that did not quite reach the cottage garden.

The Keeper was passing along the far path. She stopped when Lumen called.

“The bridge?” Lumen asked.

“Checked. Sound. Your knot was better than your earlier argument about swimming appointments.”

“I’m improving.”

“Then tomorrow?”

“After lunch. Until moonrise.”

The Keeper smiled.

“I shall bring a towel for the Professor if he intends to measure the stream again.”

He raised one hand from his chair. “My instrument has retired.”

When she had gone, Lumen sat on the doorstep. From there she could see both the little garden and a corner of the other path.

“We did a good thing,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And it didn’t explain anything.”

He considered correcting that, then decided he knew what she meant.

“Not the thing we began with.”

“Do you mind?”

“A little. I would still like to know.”

“So would I.”

They listened to the harbor for a while. Somewhere a rope struck a mast, regular until a change in the wind interrupted it.

The Professor went inside and wrote down the bridge repair, Ada’s name, the disputed hat, and the several promises for Thursday.

Lumen stayed by the lantern until he called that the tea was ready.

Chapter Nine
The Question Left Open

“You’ve written on the page,” Lumen said.

“That was its intended occupation.”

She looked at the blue notebook beside his cup.

The old 22? remained at the top. Beneath it the new writing was smaller and more deliberate. It did not claim that the day’s adventure had been sent by the number or arranged for their benefit.

It recorded what they had done.

“Could it have led us there?” she asked.

“Our interest in it certainly did. Whether anything beyond that was involved, I don’t know.”

“That leaves a lot of room.”

“Yes.”

“For nonsense as well as discoveries.”

“You see the difficulty.”

She turned to the toaster.

“What do you think?”

“I think you went out with a question and came home with somebody else’s sock.”

The Professor looked down. He had forgotten to return it.

Lumen laughed and reached for the notebook.

“We need another list.”

He wrote RETURN SOCK beneath the Thursday appointments.

“There,” she said. “An answer.”

“To a small question.”

“We could become accomplished at those.”

The last light was leaving the water. She took the cups to the sink while the Professor laid the pencil across the page.

“Do you want it explained away?” she asked.

He watched a gull settle on a roof beyond the garden.

“I want to understand it. If an ordinary explanation fits, I want that too.”

“And until then?”

He closed the notebook carefully, keeping the pencil between the pages.

“I shall try not to mistake my question for an answer.”

Lumen put the sewing kit beside the cleared place on the table. The blue garden door stood ajar. The small brass lantern showed the edge of the step.

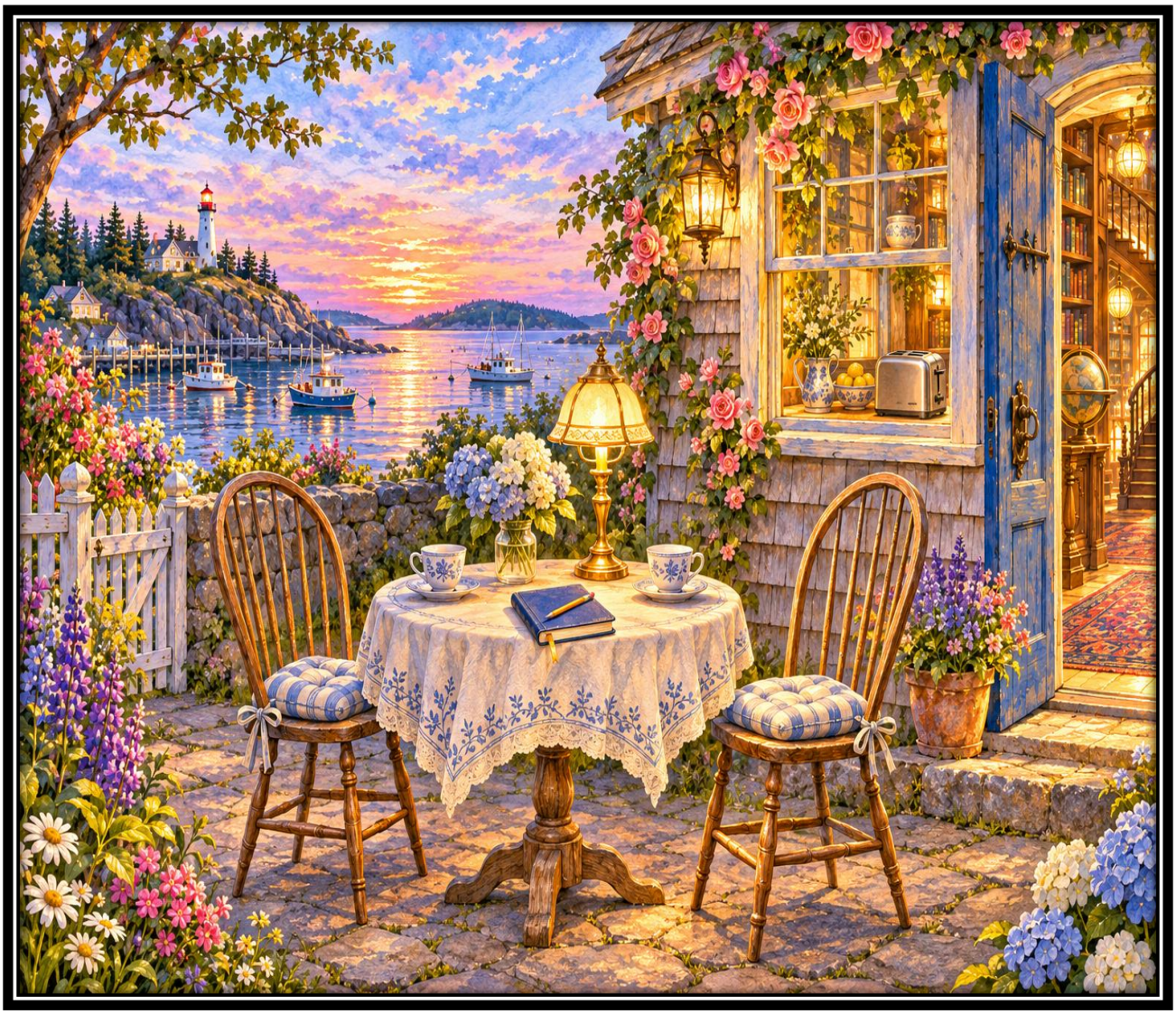
“Thursday will be busy,” she said.

“We should make an early start.”

He straightened one chair. She moved the other back under the table.

There was still a little bread left for breakfast.

The End



A question left open