

### **The Meaning of Luff** by Matthew Hughes

*Matthew Hughes has been one of our most prolific--and most popular--contributors in recent years. His stories are all set in the penultimate age of Old Earth (one eon before Jack Vance's Dying Earth). Most of his stories have featured either Henghis Hapthorn or Guth Bandar, but here we meet a somewhat shady fellow by name of Luff Imbry. (Fans of Henghis Hapthorn, take note of the forthcoming novel, Majestrum, which is due out later this year.)*

Welliver Tung had owed Luff Imbry a sum of money for longer than was advisable. The amount was more than five thousand hepts, Imbry's commission on the return to their owner of certain items that had gone astray late one evening when Tung found herself in the objects' presence while passing through the private rooms of the financier Hundegar Abrax while he and his household slept.

Abrax had not wanted the nature of the missing items to become public knowledge. He knew people who knew people who knew Imbry. Overtures were made, inquiries carried out, the items located and a finder's fee agreed upon. Neither Tung nor Imbry had thought it wise to attend the transfer of the goods to Abrax's agent, in case the Archonate Bureau of Scrutiny had somehow caught a whisper of the doings. They sent a young man experienced in such assignments who did not mind having all of his memories--except for the time, place, and terms of the handover--temporarily misplaced. Their restoration was never complete, and always brought on headaches and double vision, but the fellow considered himself adequately paid.

The operation was carried out with smooth precision on a busy corner in the ancient City of Olkney, capital of the incomparably more ancient world of Old Earth. But Welliver Tung did not keep her appointment the next day at Bolly's Snug, a tavern where Imbry often liked to conduct business; its back reaches were a warren of private rooms, some with ingenious exits known only to those who paid the owner, Bashur Bolly, handsomely for that knowledge.

Imbry waited until it was clear that Tung was not coming, then returned to his operations center--a concealed room in a nondescript house in a quiet corner of Olkney--to consult his information retrieval matrix. He soon ascertained that Tung had not been taken up by the scroots overnight, nor had she been fished out of Mornedy Sound with heavy objects fastened to her person--an occasional occupational hazard of her profession.

Imbry placed the tips of his plump fingers together and rested his several chins upon them. He thought through the situation. Tung knew him well enough to understand the danger inherent in pulling him when he expected a push, as the expression went. If she was withholding the fat man's commission it was because she needed the funds. If she needed the funds to pay a debt to someone whose collection methods might be even more appalling than Luff Imbry's, he would have heard of it. Therefore, she required the five thousand hepts to take advantage of some opportunity to earn even more, out of which she would seek to mollify Imbry with a bonus.

He returned to his research matrix and made inquiries that spun off from Welliver Tung's several fictitious identities, which he knew about though she did not know that he knew. Data flowed his way and he soon snapped up a telling mote: under the name Harch Belanye, Tung had that morning placed a deposit on a derelict house in Ombron Square, in a district that had once been fashionable but had now fallen into the disrepute that hangs upon desperate poverty.

He conducted more research, this time centered on the property, and acquired further facts. After careful thought, he decided to equip himself with a needler, a police-issue shocker and an elision suit. The garment was made of a material that bent light around its wearer, making him unnoticeable except to the well-trained eye. He retrieved the items from a concealed closet that was well stocked with the tools of his illicit trade, many of them designed by Imbry himself.

Outside, he summoned a public aircar and had it drop him beside an alley two streets from Ombron Square. There he slipped into the elision suit, positioned his weapons for easy deployment, and set off to find Welliver Tung. His unseen passage along the debris-strewn streets excited no comment from the few pedestrians he slipped past.

The house that Tung had bought dated from the umpteenth revival of an ornate style of architecture that Imbry considered both finicky and overdone. Its defenses were also standard and he rapidly tickled his way through them, entering the rear of the place on the ground floor. The cleaning systems had cycled down to minimal, and dust hung in the air, along with a faintly sweet mustiness that Imbry recognized as the scent of death, attenuated by the passing of several years.

The odor corroborated what Imbry had gathered from his researches: the former owner of the property, Tib denAarrafol, had been a recluse with few associates and no family. He had not been seen in public for more than a decade, and had most likely died a solitary death here at home, his corpse drying and moldering inconspicuously while the house puttered on about him. At some point, tollsters from the Archonate's fiduciary division had affixed a notice to the door stipulating that unless unpaid taxes were made good, the place would be auctioned. Tib denAarrafol being unable to meet his obligations, the property had gone to the sole bidder: Welliver Tung.

Imbry listened and deduced that the new owner was engaged in moving furniture in one of the front rooms. With his shocker in one hand and the needler in the other, he made his way toward the scraping and bumping. At the end of a dimly lit hall he peered through a doorway and spied his debtor shoving chairs and side tables across the uncarpeted floor, leaving a blank space before a sideboard that stood against the far wall. On its recently dusted surface rested what looked to be a dull black stone the size of Imbry's head, set in an armature of tarnished silver.

The fat man turned his gaze to each corner of the room, determining that Welliver Tung was alone. Then he stepped into the doorway, aimed both weapons and said, "You owe me."

Tung neither squeaked nor jumped. Imbry admired the professionalism that caused her to freeze, then turn oh so slowly toward the door, showing her hands empty and well clear of her body. He knew that all she was seeing was a slight shimmer behind a needler and shocker suspended in the air and directed her way. But his voice would have been unmistakable.

"I knew you would show up eventually," she said. "I was hoping to have enough time to ready this for you."

"In situations like this I have found it useful to appear unexpectedly," he said.

"I fully intended to pay you."

"Of course you did. Now explain to me, and be brief, why you haven't, and while you do so I will weigh the penalty."

She had prepared her story. She had been looking for out-of-the-way premises in which to store various items over the short to medium terms and had canvassed abandoned properties in this district. The denAarrafol house had seemed promising, so she had entered and inspected it, finding the former owner upstairs in bed, where he had quietly expired some years previously.

His faint presence did not disturb Tung, who had then gone through the house carefully, in case there might be objects of value pining away for want of ownership. She had found two secret compartments, one of which contained a number of odd items, including an ancient grimoire whose author assumed that magical spells could be efficacious.

"It seems that denAarrafol dabbled in thaumaturgy," she said. "He was working on a book of his own when he died. He believed that magic and rationalism alternated over the aeons in a great cycle and that we are approaching a cusp at which the Wheel turns anew and spells and cantrips become operative, while physics and chemistry become unreliable."

"I have heard of the theory," Imbry said. "It can be a useful construct when separating the gullible from their assets."

"It turns out there is something to it," Tung said.

"Oh?"

"Along with the spell book and various paraphernalia, I found that," Tung said, indicating the stone on the sideboard.

"And that is?" Imbry said, stepping into the room for a closer inspection of the black thing, though he kept an eye on Welliver Tung.

"In denAarrafol's book, it was referred to as a 'salience indicator,'" Tung said. "It reveals the purpose of a life."

"Of life in general?"

"No, of a specific life--yours, mine, anyone's."

Imbry peered more closely at the stone. It seemed to be a mere lump of black stuff, dull and unreflective. "And how is this determined?"

"It is difficult to..." Tung broke off. "You're going to think that I am trying to slip a flat one under you."

"You would not want me to think that," Imbry said. He assessed the unconscious messages that came from her face and posture, as well as the tiny beads of perspiration that appeared on her upper lip. "I believe you are about to offer me what you, at least, believe to be the truth."

He saw honest relief wash over her. "I'm waiting," he said.

"DenAarrafol's notes say it is a portion of the consciousness--not an organ like the brain but the 'condition of being aware' was how he put it--of an entity that inhabits another continuum," she said. "This entity comprehends the interlinkages of all life in our continuum. It knows the why of every creature's existence."

"Some sort of god?" Imbry asked.

"No," she said, "for it can do nothing with the information. DenAarrafol likened it to a book on a shelf, though the kind of intelligence that would open such a book and read what is written in it was beyond his comprehension. This lump represents but a single 'page,' a page that nonetheless contains the meaning of every life on Old Earth, and perhaps even all the lives of the trillion inhabitants of the Ten Thousand Worlds."

Several large questions came to mind, but Imbry put them aside for later consideration and chose instead to ask a small and simple one. "Why did you buy the house if all you wanted was the 'salience indicator?'"

"It won't move," she said. She spread her hands in a gesture of bafflement. "Again, I don't understand it, but it seems that the object is not really 'here.' Instead, an 'impression' of it is reflected into our universe,

but a reflection from its continuum manifests itself as a dense and lightless object in ours, though it remains 'connected' in some manner. In short, it would be easier to move the Devenish Range to the other side of the planet than to budge that thing a hairbreadth."

Imbry moved on to another question. "How does it work?" Then he quickly added one more. "And what does it actually do?"

The operation was uncomplicated: touch the black lump with the written name or the image of any person, or even an item that had often been in close proximity to the subject. The effect was also simple, Tung said, and immediate: the meaning of that person's existence appeared in the mind of he who had initiated the operation.

Imbry digested the information. "Then if I write my name on a piece of paper and bring it into contact with the object, it will reveal to me the meaning of my existence?"

"No," said Tung. "It will reveal to you the meaning of anyone else's existence except your own. The thaumaturge found that seeking to know his own salience brought on a blinding headache. He conjectured that persevering would create a feedback resonance that would damage his brain."

"Damage how?"

"Boiling followed by melting, was how he put it."

"You have, of course, tested denAarrafol's surmises?"

"I have. They seem to be correct."

"And thus your plan was to reopen the house as a venue for revealing the meaning of their lives to those who would offer a reasonable fee?" Imbry said.

"At first," Tung said. "Once it became the vogue to discover one's salience, I intended to charge a quite unreasonable fee, out of which I would repay what I owe you, plus a substantial bonus."

"A good plan," Imbry said. "It requires only one small emendation."

Tung stiffened. "I think it is perfect as it is."

"You lack the perspective," said Imbry, "of someone with two weapons."

Her shoulders slumped. "I have made a considerable outlay from my limited resources to acquire this house."

"From *my* resources," Imbry corrected her. "Thus it shall be a joint venture. I shall take eighty parts; you will have twenty. But, out of gratitude, I shall write off the five thousand hepts you owe me."

"This seems unjust."

"It seemed no less unjust to me that my five thousand were put to work without my consent. I know several less indulgent persons who, in the same circumstances, would now be arranging to remove two corpses from these premises."

Tung grumbled but acquiesced. "It was ever thus," she said. "The big teeth take the big bites."

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Imbry invested more of his funds in the enterprise, thoroughly refurbishing the house so that its

appearance would not startle or dismay persons of advanced social rank. When all was in readiness, he employed his research matrix to identify a dozen persons, each of whom met two criteria: they would be intrigued by the concept, and they would spread the word among the refined of Olkney in a manner that would bring those whose lives were governed by fashion to his door, thirsting for knowledge.

He summoned the dozen to a soiree and demonstrated the salience indicator. As he had expected, the meaning of each of the initial batch's lives was confined to the subject's having an effect on style. To Imbry these seemed poor excuses for existence, but the opinion makers were delighted to have their tawdry and ephemeral goals demonstrated.

Word soon spread. Imbry engaged a pair of large, silent attendants and dressed them in suitably impressive costumes. The mutes collected extravagant fees and conducted aristocrats and magnates into the presence. The fat man had determined that he would earn more if he restricted his operation to no more than one hour, every other night. The compressed supply of enlightenment speedily drove up demand, returning his investment many times over in the first week, then lifting his profit into reaches that were enough to make even Imbry blink in surprise.

He fastidiously meted out to Welliver Tung every grimlet that she was owed as a twenty-percent participant in the venture. Her take must have greatly exceeded whatever she might have expected to have received before his entry into the proceedings, Imbry knew. Yet she showed a sour attitude, even as he handed her a valise bulging with pelf.

To cheer her, he said, "Let me put your name to the salience indicator. Free of charge. It will be as if you were a duke or count-margrave."

She signaled a negative. "I decided from the beginning that that was not a knowledge I cared to encompass."

"Why?" Imbry said, in an airy tone. "Did you not wish to discover that the point of your existence was to assist me in my goals?"

Tung's eyes became narrow, glinting with a hard light, but she said nothing. She departed and Imbry prepared to receive the next intake of well-heeled punters.

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In time, however, a bleakness threatened to descend upon the fat man. He tired of the sameness of the life-meanings he dispensed to the highest echelons of Old Earth society. Too often, he was required to extemporize an answer because he soon discovered that telling the unvarnished truth, as it appeared in his mind when he touched a name or image to the lump, could never satisfy the client.

A young lordling did not welcome being told, "The meaning of your life is that you will father a child who will in turn father a child who will, seventy-three years from now, bump into a man on a street corner, causing that man to miss an appointment."

They preferred to hear, "Because of a remark that you drop into a casual conversation, a brilliant new epoch in applied fabric design will sweep the finest salons of Olkney. Unfortunately, it will not become the overpowering vogue until months after your demise, but your genius will be recognized as its inciting spark, and the ages will remember you and bless your name."

He was not surprised that the clients found these patent fantasies much more palatable than the blunt truth. But it continued to wear on Imbry that so many of the lives he touched to the salience indicator were revealed to be of almost no consequence at all. So many people were little more than placeholders, keeping a seat warm until someone of true moment should come along and briefly occupy it.

"But, perhaps," he told himself, "I achieve these tiresome, tawdry results because I am limiting the revelations to the idle rich, who live notoriously unproductive lives. If I sought out saints and savants, I would likely see cheerier visions."

Then he reminded himself that the quality of the visions was not the purpose of the endeavor. The goal was to make wealth flow thickly toward Luff Imbry, and the returns were more than handsome. Imbry used them to indulge his increasingly elevated tastes and fancies--especially those that arose from his gustatory appetites. He devoured dishes that were legendary, including some that could not be created more than once in a century, so rare were the ingredients. From these occasions he derived a grim satisfaction, reveling in the textures and aromas, while saying to himself, *If not I, then who?*

Sometimes, as he lay in his bed, the savors of the evening's feast lingering on his palate, his mind would drift toward the inevitable question. Always, he pushed temptation away. What would it serve to know the salience of Luff Imbry? If he learned the context of his existence, for good or ill (and he did not expect much good), could he summon the strength to go on doing as he did?

He recalled one client whose purpose in life was discharged even before he reached full maturity: by waving a wad of currency under the percepts of an autocab, the young buck had snatched it from a poor young woman already late for an interview with an editor, thus smothering a prospective great literary career in its infancy. The rest of the client's life was an empty afterthought. The young woman's fate was unrecorded.

Suppose Imbry discovered that the point of his being had been unwittingly achieved in his youth. Could he go on filling and voiding his innards, year upon year, knowing that his moment had already come and gone, unmarked, unheeded?

Or suppose, for all his mastery of the arts of peculation and hornswoggery, he turned out to be but a minor player in someone else's grander game--the user used--would his pride withstand the illumination? These were questions best left unanswered.

It would be different if he had someone with whom he could share the burden of such knowledge, but Imbry accepted that solitariness was a necessary condition of the profession he had freely chosen. It would not do to make dear friends only to see them become liabilities that must be disposed of.

Then one evening, he came to the denAarrafol house to discover that Welliver Tung had arrived before him. She was waiting in the now opulent room where the salience indicator sat, wearing an expression that Imbry could only characterize as a mean-hearted sulk.

He sent one of the attendants to retrieve her portion of the week's proceeds: the big man returned lugging two filled satchels, but Tung accepted them with ill grace.

"What is wrong?" Imbry said.

"This should have been all mine."

Imbry formed his plump lips into an arrangement that expressed a sad knowledge. "Be thankful that it wasn't. I have discovered that there is a price to be paid for what that thing reveals, and paid even by one who merely transmits the revelation."

Tung made a wordless sound that indicated she neither shared nor valued his opinion.

Imbry said, "Not everything that passes through pipes is clean and wholesome, thus it is fortunate for many pipes that they are not burdened with awareness." He looked inward for a moment, then said, "I

have come to believe that denAarrafol's death may have been self-inflicted."

Tung made the same sound as before, only with more emphasis. "Don't try to wax me," she said. "I don't hold a polish."

Imbry was capable of expressing much with a shrug. He now offered her a particularly eloquent one. Her jawline grew sharp, and she reached into a pocket and withdrew a slip of paper.

"While I was waiting I wrote down your name," she said. Before he could move she leaned back and touched the paper to the dull blackness. Imbry saw the effect of the contact appear in her face: surprise followed by comprehension succeeded by feline satisfaction.

"Do you want to know the point of your existence?" she said. "Such as it is?"

"From your face, I believe I already do," he said.

"Why settle for faith when certainty is at hand?"

There was a needler in his pocket. He thought about using it, then decided that he would not. He stood quietly while she told him the meaning of his life. It did not take long.

When she was finished he remained standing, contemplating the images she had conjured into his mind: his future self, the persons into whose story he would be drawn, the small role he would fulfill--not as the hero, not even as the pivot of fate, but as merely a supporting player in another's drama, there to speak his lines and do his business, then fade away.

After a moment, his eyes came back from the vision to encompass Welliver Tung, saw her flinch at the hardness in his face. Then he smiled a small smile, gave her another shrug and said, "The house is yours. I advise you to close it up and forget its secrets."

He turned and left, took an air car to his favorite club and treated himself to a sumptuous dinner. He paid close attention to every facet of the experience, lingered over each dish, cherished every morsel. Sated, he retired to one of the transients' rooms and slept better than he had for some weeks.

Not long after, business took him away--an extended tour of several worlds up and down The Spray, where people could be persuaded to pay remarkable sums for goods that were bedecked with just the right glamor of legend blended with trumpery. He took pleasure in his work, not because it had intrinsic meaning but because it was well wrought.

"It is good to have substance to one's existence," he told his dark reflection in the first class observation port of a space liner, as the stars streamed by. "But if fate denies one substance, one can yet do a lot with style."

When he returned to Olkney he learned that Welliver Tung had leapt from the upper story of the Brelle Tower. He heard nothing of what had happened to the salience indicator, and did not inquire.