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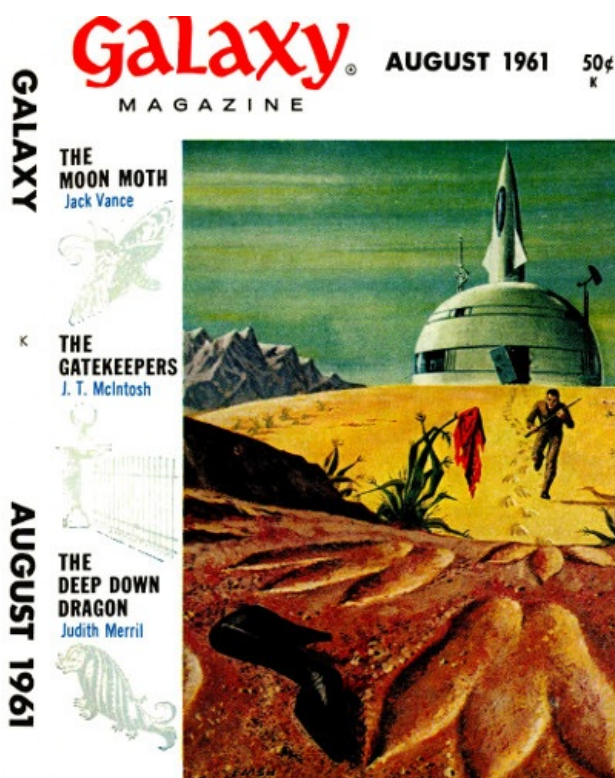
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ALOYS ***



ALOYS

BY R. A. LAFFERTY

Illustrated by WALKER

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***He appeared in glory and sank without
a trace. Why? How? For the first time
anywhere, here is the startling inside story.***

He had flared up more brightly than anyone in memory. And then he was gone. Yet there was ironic laughter where he had been; and his ghost still walked. That was the oddest thing: to encounter his ghost.

It was like coming suddenly on Haley's Comet drinking beer at the Plugged Nickel Bar, and having it deny that it was a celestial phenomenon at all, that it had ever been beyond the sun. For he could have been the man of the century, and now it was not even known if he was alive. And if he were alive, it would be very odd if he would be hanging around places like the Plugged Nickel Bar.

This all begins with the award. But before that it begins with the man.

Professor Aloys Foulcault-Oeg was acutely embarrassed and in a state of dread.

"These I have to speak to, all these great men. Is even glory worth the price when it must be paid in such coin?"

Aloys did not have the amenities, the polish, the tact. A child of penury, he had all his life eaten bread that was part sawdust, and worn shoes that were part cardboard. He had an overcoat that had been his father's, and before that his grandfather's.

This coat was no longer handsome, its holes being stuffed and quilted with ancient rags. It was long past its years of greatness, and even when Aloys had inherited it as a young man it was in the afternoon of its life. And yet it was worth more than anything else he owned in the world.

Professor Aloys had become great in spite of—or because of?—his poverty. He had worked out his finest theory, a series of nineteen interlocked equations of cosmic shapeliness and simplicity. He had worked it out on a great piece of butchers' paper soaked with lamb's blood, and had so given it to the world.

And once it was given, it was almost as though nothing else could be added on any subject whatsoever. Any further detailing would be only footnotes to it and all the sciences no more than commentaries.

Naturally this made him famous. But the beauty of it was that it made him famous, not to the commonalty of mankind (this would have been a burden to his sensitively tuned soul), but to a small and scattered class of extremely erudite men (about a score of them in the world). Their recognition brought him almost, if not quite, complete satisfaction.

But he was not famous in his own street or his own quarter of town. And it was in this stark conglomerate of dark-souled alleys and roofs that Professor Aloys had lived all his life till just thirty-seven days ago.

When he received the announcement, award, and invitation, he quickly calculated the time. It was not very long to allow travel halfway around the world. Being locked out of his rooms, as he often was, he was unencumbered by baggage or furniture, and he left for the ceremony at once.

With the announcement, award, and invitation, there had also been a check; but as he was not overly familiar with the world of finance or with the English language in which it was written, he did not recognize it for what it was. Having used the back of it to write down a formula that had crept into his mind, he shoved the check, forgotten, into one of the pockets of his greatcoat.

For three days he rode a river boat to the port city, hidden and hungry. There he concealed himself on an ocean tramp. That he did not starve on this was due to the caprice of the low-lifers who discovered him, for they made him stay hidden in a terrible bunker and every day or two they passed in a bucket to him.

Then, several ports and many days later, he left the ship like a crippled, dirty animal. And it was in That City and on That Day. For the award was to be that evening.

"These I have to speak to, all these wonderful men who are higher than the grocers, higher than the butchers even. These men get more respect than a policeman, than a canal boat captain. They are wiser than a mayor and more honored than a merchant. They know arts more intricate than a clock-maker's and are virtuous beyond the politicians. More perspicacious than editors, more talented than actors, these are the great men of the world. And I am only Aloys, and now I am too ragged and dirty even to be Aloys any more. I no longer am a man with a name."

For he was very humble as he walked the great town where even the shop girls were dressed like princesses, and all the restaurants were so fine that only the rich people would have dared to go in them at all. Had there been poor people (and there were none) there would have been no place

for them to eat.

"But it is to me they have given the prize. Not to Schellendore and not to Otlebaum, not to Francks nor Timiryaseff, not even to Pitirim-Koss, the latchet of whose shoe I am not—but why do I say that?—he was not, after all, very bright—all of them are inadequate in some way—the only one who was ever able to get to the heart of these great things was Aloys Foulcault-Oeg, who happens to be myself. It is a strange thing that they should honor me, and yet I believe they could not have made a better choice."

So pride and fear warred in him, but it was always the pride that lost. For he had only a little bit of pride, undernourished and on quaking ground, and against it was a whole legion of fears, apprehensions, shames, dreads, embarrassments, and nightmarish bashfulnesses.

He begged a little bit when he had found a poor part of town. But even here the people were of the rich poor, not the poor as he had known them.



When he had money in his pocket, he had a meal. Then he went to Jiffy Quick While You Wait Cleaners Open Day and Night to have his clothes cleaned. He wrapped himself in dignity and a blanket while he waited. And as the daylight was coming to an end, they brought his clothes back to him.

"We have done all we could do. If we had a week or a month, we might do a little more, but not much."

Then he went out into the town, cleaner than he had been in many years, and he walked to the hall of the Commendation and Award. Here he watched all the great men arrive in private cars and taxis: Ergodic Eimer, August Angstrom, Vladimir Vor. He watched them and thought of what he would say to them, and then he realized that he had forgotten his English.

"I remember dog, that is the first word I ever learned, but what will I say to them about a dog? I remember house and horse and apple and fish. Oh, now I remember the entire language. But what if I forget it again? Would it not be an odd speech if I could only say apple and fish and house and dog? I would be shamed."

He wished he were rich and could dress in white like the street sweepers, or in black leather like the newsboy on the corner. He saw Edward Edelstein and Christopher Cronin enter and he cowered on the street and knew that he would never be able to talk to those great men.

A fine gentleman came out and walked directly to him.

"You are the great Professor Foulcault-Oeg? I would have known you anywhere. True greatness shines from you. Our city is honored tonight. Come inside and we will go to a little room apart, for I see that you will have to compose yourself first. I am Graf-Doktor Hercule Bienville-Stravroguine."

Whyever he said he was the Graf-Doktor is a mystery, because he was Willy McGilly and the other was just a name that he made up that minute.

Within, they went to a small room behind the cloak room. But here, in spite of the smooth kindness of the gracious gentleman, Aloys knew that he would never be able to compose himself. He was an epouvantail, a pugalo, a clown, a ragamuffin. He looked at the nineteen-point outline of the address he was to give. He shuddered and he gobbled like a turkey. He sniffled and he wiped his nose on his sleeve. He was terrified that the climax of his life's work should find him too craven to accept it. And he discovered that he had forgotten his English again.

"I remember bread and butter, but I don't know which one goes on top. I know pencil and pen-knife and bed, but I have entirely forgotten the word for maternal uncle. I remember plow, but what in the world will I say to all these great men about a plow? I pray that this cup may pass from me."

Then he disintegrated in one abject mass of terror. Several minutes went by.

But when he emerged from the room he was a different man entirely. Erect, alive, intense, queerly handsome, and now in formal attire, he mounted with the sure grace of a panther to the speaker's platform. Once only he glanced at the nineteen-point outline of his address. As there is no point in keeping it a secret, it was as follows: 1. Cepheid and Cerium—How Long Is a Yardstick? 2. Double Trouble—Is Ours a Binary Universe? 3. Cerebrum and Cortex—the Mathematics of Melancholia. 4. Microphysics and Megacyclic Polyneums. 5. *Ego, No, Hemeis*—the Personality of the Subconscious. 6. Linear Convexity and Lateral Intransigence. 7. Betelgeuse Betrayed—the Myth of Magnitude. 8. Mu-Meson, the Secret of Metamorphosis. 9. Theogony and Tremor—the Mathematics of Seismology. 10. Planck's Constant and Agnesi's Variable. 11. Diencephalon and Di-Gamma—Unconscionable Thoughts about Consciousness. 12. Inverse Squares and the Quintesimal Radicals. 13. The Chain of Error in the Lineal B Translation. 14. Skepticism—the Humor of the Humorless. 15. Ogive and Volute—Thoughts on Celestial Curvature. 16. Conic Sections—Small Pieces of Infinity. 17. Eschatology—Medium Thoughts about the End. 18. Hypopolarity and Cosmic Hysteresis. 19. The Invisible Quadratic, or This is All Simpler than You Think.

You will immediately see the beauty of this skeleton, and yet to flesh it would not be the work of an ordinary man.

He glanced over it with the sure smile of complete confidence. Then he spoke softly to the master of ceremonies in a whisper with a rumble that could be heard throughout the hall.

"I am here. I will begin. There is no need for any further introduction."

For the next three and a half hours he held that intelligent audience completely spellbound, enchanted. They followed, or seemed to follow, his lightning flashes of metaphor illumining the craggy chasms of his vast subjects.

They thrilled to the magnetic power of his voice, urbane yet untamed, with its polyglot phrasing and its bare touch of accent so strange as to be baffling; ancient, surely, and yet from a land beyond the Pale. And they quivered with interior pleasure at the glorious unfolding in climax after climax of these before only half-glimpsed vistas.

Here was a world of mystery revealed in all its wildness, and it obeyed and stood still, and he named its name. The nebula and the conch lay down together, and the ultra-galaxies equated themselves with the zeta mesons. Like a rich householder, he brought from his store treasures old and new, and nothing like them had ever been seen or heard before.

At one point Professor Timiryaseff cried out in bafflement and incomprehension, and Doctor Ergodic Eimer buried his face in his hands, for even these most erudite men could not glimpse all the shattering profundity revealed by the fantastic speaker.

And when it was over they were limp and delighted that so much had been made known to them. They had the crown without the cross, and the odd little genius had filled them with a rich glow.

The rest was perfunctory, commendations and testimonials from all the great men. The trophy, heavy and rich but not flashy, worth the lifetime salary of a professor of mathematics, was accepted almost carelessly. And then the cup was passed quietly, which is to say the tall cool glasses went around as the men still lingered and talked with hushed pleasure.

"Gin," said the astonishing orator. "It is the drink of bums and impoverished scholars, and I am both. Yes, anything at all with it."

Then he spoke to Maecenas, who was at his side, the patron who was footing the bill for all this gracious extravagance.



"The check I have never cashed, having been much in movement since I have received it. And as to me it is a large amount, though perhaps not to others, and as you yourself have signed it, I wonder if you could cash it for me now."

"At once," said Maecenas, "at once. Ten minutes and we shall have the sum here. Ah, you have endorsed it with a formula! Who but Professor Aloys Foulcault-Oeg could be so droll? Look, he has endorsed it with a formula!"

"Look, look! Let us copy! Why, this is marvelous! It takes us even beyond his great speech of tonight. The implications of it!"

"Oh, the implications!" they said as they copied it off, and the implications rang in their heads like bells of the future.

Now it had suddenly become very late, and the elated little man with the gold and gemmed trophy under one arm and the packet of bank notes in his pocket disappeared as by magic.

Professor Aloys Foulcault-Oeg was not seen again; or, if seen, he was not known, for hardly anyone would have known his face. In fact, when he had painfully released the bonds by which he had been tied in the little room behind the cloak room, and removed the shackles from his ankles, he did not pause at all, but slipped into his greatcoat and ran out into the night. Not for many blocks did he even remove the gag from his mouth, not realizing in his confusion what it was that obstructed his speech and breathing. But when he got it out, it was a pleasant relief.

A kind gentleman took him in hand, the second to do so that night. He was bundled into a kind of taxi and driven to a mysterious quarter called Wreckville. And deep inside a secret building he was given a bath and a bowl of hot soup. And later he gathered with others at a festive board.

Here Willy McGilly was king. As he worked his way into his cups with the gold trophy in front of him, he expounded and elucidated.

"I was wonderful. I held them in the palm of my hand. Was I not wonderful, Oeg?"

"I could not hear all, for I was on the floor of the little room. But from what I could hear, yes, you were wonderful."

"Only once in my life did I give a better speech. It was the same speech, but it was newer then. This was in Little Dogie, New Mexico, and I was selling a snake-oil derivative whose secret I still cannot reveal. But I was good tonight and some of them cried. And now what will you do, Oeg? Do you know what we are?"

"*Moshennekov.*"

"Why, so we are."

"*Schwindlern.*"

"The very word."

"Low-life con men. And the world you live on is not the one you were born on. I will join you if I may."

"Oeg, you have a talent for going to the core of the apple."

For when a man (however unlikely a man) shows real talent, then the Wreckville bunch has to recruit him. They cannot have uncontrolled talent running loose in the commonalty of mankind.

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