

# THE ODD OLD BIRD

Avram Davidson

*If there is a make-believe world to rival Terry Pratchett's Ankh-Morpork then it is the American writer Avram Davidson's Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania, where the Emperor's wizard, Dr Engelbert Eszterhazy, performs his heroic tasks.*

*Davidson has been writing about this comic fantasy land since 1975 and his inventive imagination shows no sign of drying up. In an article, "The Inchoation of Eszterhazy", written in 1988, he explained that the inspiration for the series had come from the arcane symbols seen in the classic German movie, The Cabinet of Dr Caligari, which he had never been able to get out of his mind. 'Gradually it came to me that there had been an empire in Eastern Europe which had been so completely destroyed that we no longer even remembered it like the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary; that being an empire, it had an emperor; that the emperor had a wizard; the wizard drove about the streets of Bella (BELgrade/Vienna) in a steam runabout; that the emperor's name was Ignats Louis and the wizard's name was Engelbert Eszterhazy.'*

*The concept so fired Davidson's imagination that he wrote the first eight stories in just six weeks, developing an entire world of bizarre people, curious customs and extraordinary events that instantly grabbed the attention of fantasy readers. The success of Doctor Eszterhazy's exploits in succeeding stories has generated a fan club in the USA, a detailed map of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania by John Westfall, and the plaudits of SF writer John Clute, who has described Davidson as one of America's foremost contemporary writers of 'obtrusive literacy and wit'.*

*Avram Davidson (1923—) was born in New York and, according to his own account, 'educated in the local schools, a process which nearly unfitted me forever for participation in any useful functions whatsoever.' After serving with the US Navy in World War Two, he had a series of jobs, including sheep-herding, tomato-picking and inspecting fish-livers, before selling his first story, 'My Boy Friend's Name is Jello', to Fantasy and Science Fiction in 1954. Another story, 'Or All the Seas with Oysters', won him a Hugo Award in 1958, and a string of collections in the following years established him as a uniquely comic voice in fantasy fiction.*

*'The Odd Old Bird' is one of the most recent Eszterhazy stories and was first published in the revived Weird Tales magazine Winter issue of 1988-9. Those encountering the allusive Doctor for the first time will probably need no further encouragement to seek out his other exploits once they have finished the next few pages. . .*

\* \* \* \*

'But why a canal?'

'Cheaper, more, and better victuals.'

'Oh.'

Prince Roldran Vlox (to cut his titles quite short, and never mind about his being a Von Stuart y Fitz-Guelf) had ‘just dropped in’ to talk to Doctor Engelbert Eszterhazy about the Proposed Canal connecting the Ister and the Danube...there were, in fact, several proposed canals and each one contained several sub-propositions: should it go right through the entirely Vlox-held Fens (‘The Mud,’ it was fondly called... ‘Roldry Mud,’ the prince sometimes called himself)? should it go rather to the right or rather to the left? should it perhaps not go exactly ‘through’ them at all, but use their surplusage of waters for feeder systems? and—or—on the one hand This, on the other hand That—

‘What’s that new picture over on the wall, Engly?’ Guest asked suddenly. Host began to explain. ‘Ah,’ said Guest, ‘one of those funny French knick-knacks, eh? Always got some funny knick-knacks ... The British for sport, the French for fun...’ Still the guestly eyes considered the picture over on the wall. ‘That’s a damned funny picture...it’s all funny little speckles ...’

‘Why, Roldry, you are right. What good eyes you have.’

Promptly: ‘Don’t soil them by a lot of reading, is why. Lots of chaps want to know about a book, “Is it spicy?” Some want to know, “Is it got lots of facts?” What *I* want to know is only, “Has it got big print?” Shan’t risk spoiling my eyes and having to wear a monocle. One has to be a hunter, first, you know.’ He made no further reference to the fact his host himself sometimes wore a monocle.

Eszterhazy returned to the matter of canals: ‘Here is a sketch of a proposed catchment basin—Yes, Lemkotch?’

‘Lord Grumpkin!’ said the Day Porter.

There followed a rather short man of full figure, with a ruddy, shiny, cheerful face. There followed also a brief clarification, by Lemkotch’s employer, of the proper way to refer to Professor Johanno Blumpkinn, the Imperial Geologist; there followed, also, an expression on the Porter’s face, indicative of his being at all times Doctor (of Medicine, Law, Music, Philosophy, Science, and Letters) Eszterhazy’s loyal and obedient servant and all them words were not for a ignorant fellow like him (the day porter) to make heads or tails of; after which he bowed his usual brief, stiff bob and withdrew. He left behind him a slight savour of rough rum, rough tobacco, rough manhood, and rough soap ... even if not quite enough rough soap to erase the savour of the others. The room also smelled of the unbleached beeswax with which they had been rubbing—polishing, if you like—the furniture’s mahogany; of Prince Vlox, which some compared to that of a musty wolf (not perhaps to his face, though); of Eszterhazy himself (Pears soap and just a little bay rum) and of Professor Blumpkinn (Jenkinson’s Gentleman’s Cologne: more than just a little). Plus some Havana cigars supplied by the old firm of Freiburg and Treyer in the Haymarket—London was a long way from Bella, capital of the Triple Monarchy of Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania (fourth largest empire in Europe) but so was Havana, for that matter. ‘Gentlemen, you have met, I believe,’ Eszterhazy said, anyway adding, ‘Prince Vlox, Professor Blumpkinn.’

Further adding, ‘I am sorry that my servant did not get your name right, Han.’

Blumpkinn waved his hand. ‘Calling me by the old-fashioned word for the smallest coin in his native province really helps me to remember a proper value of my own worth.—Ah. *Canal* plans. I hope that when the excavations are in progress

you will be sure to keep me in mind if any interesting fossils turn up.’ It was not sure that Prince Vlox would be able to identify an interesting fossil if one hit him in the hough or bit him on the buttock, but Eszterhazy gave a serious nod. *He* knew how such things were to be done. Offer a small gift for reporting the discovery of ‘any of them funny elf-stone things as the old witch-women used to use’—they used to use them for anything from dropped stomach to teaching a damned good lesson to husbands with wandering eyes: but now all that had gone out of fashion—should certainly result in the reporting of enough interest-ing fossils, uninteresting fossils, and, indeed, non-fossils, to provide coping-stones for the entire length of the Proposed Canal ... if ever there was actually a canal...

‘And speaking of which,’ said Blumpkinn, and took two large sheets out between covers large enough to have contained the Ele-phant Folios; ‘I have brought you, Doctor ‘Bert, as I had promised, the proof-sheets of the new photo-zinc impressions of the *Archaeopteryx*, showing far greater detail than was previously available...you see...’

Doctor ‘Bert did indeed now thrust in his monocle and scanned the sheets, said that he saw. Prince Vlox glanced, glanced away, rested a more interested glance at the funny French knick-knack picture...men, women, water, grass, children, women, women ... all indeed composed of multitudes of tiny dots, speckles...points, if you liked ... a matter easily noticeable if you were up close, or had a hunter’s eye.

‘Yes, here are the independent fingers and claws, the separate and unfused metacarpals, the un-birdlike caudal appendage, all the ribs non-unciate and thin, neither birdlike nor very reptilian, the thin coracoid, the centra free as far as the sacrum, and the very long tail...’ His voice quite died away to a murmur, Professor Blumpkinn, perhaps thinking that it was not polite to lose the attention of the other guest, said, ‘This, you see, Prince Vlox, is the famous *Archaeopteryx*, hundreds of millions of years old, which the sensational press has rather inadequately described as the so-called ‘no-longer-missing-link’ between reptiles and birds...observe the sharp teeth and the feather...this other one unfortunately has no head...and this one—’

Here Prince Vlox, perhaps not an omnivorous student of palaeontology, said, ‘Yes. Seen it.’

‘Ah ... was that in London? or Berlin?’

‘Never been in either place.’

Blumpkinn gaped. Recovered himself. Looked, first amused, then sarcastic, then polite. Eszterhazy slowly looked up. ‘What do you mean, then, Roldry. “Seen it”? What—?’

Prince Vlox repeated, with a slight emphasis, that he had *seen* it. And he bulged his eyes and stared, as though to emphasise the full meaning of the verb, *to see*.

‘What do you—Ah...“Seen it,” seen it when, seen it where?’

‘On our land. Forget just when. What do you mean, “Am I sure?” *I don’t* need a monocle to look at things. Why shouldn’t I be sure? What about it?’

Blumpkinn and Eszterhazy for a moment spoke simultaneously. What about it? There were only two known *Archaeopteryx* specimens in the world! one in

London, one in Berlin—think what a third would mean! Not only for science, but for Scythia-Pannonia-Transbalkania and its prestige.

Vlox, with something like a sigh, rose to his feet; clearly the subject no longer much engaged him ... possibly because his own family and its prestige was incomparably older than the Triple Monarchy and its prestige. ‘Well, I’ll have it looked for, then. Must be off. Things to do. My wine-merchant. My gunsmith. My carriage-maker. A turn of cards at The Hell-Hole. See if they’ve finished re-upholstering my railroad car. Tobacconist...new powder scales...Can I execute any commissions for you, as they say? Haw haw! Tell you what, Engly, damned if I know what you want with this odd old bird, but tell you what: trade it for that funny French painting.’ And he donned his tattered seal-skin cap (so that he should not be struck by lightning) and his wisent-skin cape (also fairly tattered, but wisents weren’t easy to get any more), picked up his oak-stick, nodded his Roldry-nod, neither languid nor brisk, and went out into Little Turkling Street, where his carriage (as they say) awaited him. Some backwoods nobles kept a pied-à-terre in Bella in the form of a house or apartment, Prince Roldran preferred to keep a stable and to sleep in the loft. With taste and scent, no argument.

Silence for some seconds. Such was the prince’s presence, that his immediate absence left a perceptible hole.

Blumpkinn: What do you say, Doctor ‘Bert, is the prince *quite*, [a hesitation]...dependable?

Eszterhazy [removing his monocle]: In some things, instantly. He would think nothing of striking a rabid wolf with bare hands to save you. In others? well ... let us say that fossils are not quite in his line. We shall see. Any kind of fossils from out that way should be interesting. If the old witch-women have left any.

The Imperial Geologist blinked. ‘Yes ... if they’ve left any—Though I suppose...imagine, Doctor, they used to grind up dinosaur bones and feed them with bread and oil to pregnant women!!’

‘That’s what they did to my own dear Mother. Well, why not? Calcium, you know.’

The Imperial Geologist (the King-Emperor, Ignats Louis, in authorising the position, had hoped for gold and, no gold being found, had shrugged and gone out to inspect the new infantry boots)—the Imperial Geologist blinked some more. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Well, why not. Calcium ... I know.’

Some years before there had appeared the book *From Ram’s Head to Sandy Cape on Camelback, by a New Chum* (Glasscocke and Gromthorpe, No. 3, the Minories, 12/-), and Eszterhazy had translated it into Modern Gothic, as he had its successors, *Up the Fly River by Sail and Paddle*, and *In Pursuit of Poundmaker*, plus a *General Survey of the Northwest Territories* (available at Szentbelessel’s Book House near the New Model Road at two ducats *per* or all three for five ducats, each with eleven half-tone illustrations and a free patriotic bookmark; write for catalogue). From these translations a friendship had developed. Newton Charles Enderson was not really a ‘new chum,’ far from it: he was a ‘currency lad’; and now he was on holiday from the University of Eastern Australia and hoped to explore

some more, in the lands of the Triple Monarchy.

There were a number of not-very-well explored (not very well explored by any scientific expeditions, that is; they had all been very well explored by the River Tartars, the Romanou, and by all the other non-record-keeping peoples who had gone that way since the days of (and before the days of: caches of amber had been found there, and Grecian pottery) the Getae, who may or may not have been close of kin to the ancient Scythian Goths) and rather languid waterways disemboguing into the Delta of the Ister. And New Chum Enderson had wanted Eszterhazy to go exploring with him, in a pirogue. And Eszterhazy had very much wanted to do so. There were several sorts of bee-eaters which had never been well engraved, let alone photographed; skins of course were in the museums, and several water-colours had been made by someone whose identity had been given simply as *An Englishwoman*, long ago; still semi-impenetrably wrapped in her modesty, she had withdrawn into her native northern mists, leaving only copies of the water-colours behind.

‘But I am afraid that our schedules don’t match. Really I do regret.’

New Chum regretted, too. ‘But I must be back for the start of term.’

‘And I for the meeting of the Proposed Canal Committee. Well ... I know that your movements are as precisely dated as those of Phileas Fogg, so just let me know when you’ll be back, and I’ll give you a good luncheon to make up for your privations. There’s a person in the country who’s promised me a fine fat pullet, and the truffles should be good, too, so—’

New Chum gave a bark, intended for a laugh, of a sort which had terrified Pommies and Aboes alike. ‘I’m not one of your European gourmets,’ he said. ‘Grew up on damper and ‘roo. Advanced to mutton, pumpkin, and suet pud. More than once ate cockatoo—they’d told me it was chook—”chicken” to you—and I never knew the difference. Still, of course, I’ll be glad to eat what you give me, with no complaint...Ah, by the way. Don’t depend on me much or at all to identify and bring back your bee-eaters. Know *nothing* of ornithology. Officially I’m Professor of Political Economy, but what I am, actually, is an explorer. Glad to give you a set of my notes, though.’ And on this they parted.

Two pieces of news. The country pullet would be on hand the next day. Also alas the sister-in-law’s sister of Frow Widow Orgats, house-keeper and cook, had been Taken Bad with the Dropped Stomach—did she require medical advice?—an elf-stone?—no: she required the attentions of her sister’s sister-in-law. The house, with the help of its lower staff, might keep itself for a little while. ‘And Malta, who I’ve hand-picked meself, will cook for you very well till I gets back, Sir Doctor.’ Malta, thought the Sir Doctor, had perhaps been handpicked so as to prevent the Sir Doctor from thinking of her as a suitable full-time replacement—she was not perhaps very bright— but merely he said, ‘Tomorrow they are bringing up a special pullet for the luncheon with the foreign guest and it may not look just exactly as the sort they sell here at the Hen Mark in town; so mind you do it justice.’

Malta dropped several curtseys, but not, thank God, her stomach; said, ‘Holy Angels, my Lard, whatsoe’er I’m given to cook, I shall cook it fine, for Missus

she's wrote out the words for me real big on a nice piece of pasteboard.' Malta could read and she had the recipe? Well, well. Hope for the best. New Chum would perhaps not mind or even notice if the luncheon fell short of standard, but Eszterhazy, after all, would have to eat it, too.

However.

The roof of the Great Chamber did not indeed fall in on the meeting of the Proposed Canal Committee, but many other things happened, which he would hope had rather not. The chairman had forgotten the minutes of the last meeting and would not hear of the reading being skipped, *pro hac vice*, so all had to wait until they had been fetched in a slow hack, if not indeed a tumbril or an ox-cart. Then the Conservative delegation had wished to be given assurances the most profound that any land taken for the Canal would be paid for at full current market value; next, well before the Conservoes were made satisfied with such assurances, the Workingchaps' delegation had taken it into its collective head that Asian coolie labour might be employed in Canal construction and demanded positive guarantees that it would not. Then the Commercial representation desired similar soothing in regard to brick and building-stone—not only that it would not be imported from Asia, but from anywhere else outside the Empire—'Even if it has to come from Pannonia!'—something which the Pannonian delegation somehow took much amiss. Cries of *Point of order!* and *Treason!* and *What has the Committee got to hide?* and *Move the previous question!* were incessant. And Eszterhazy realised that he was absolutely certain to miss anyway most of his luncheon engagement with Enderson.

So he sent word that the meal was to proceed without him, and his apologies to his guest, and he (Eszterhazy) would join him as soon as possible.

'As soon as' was eventually reached, though he had feared it wouldn't be. As he was making his way out of the Great Chamber he encountered Professor Blumpkinn, almost in tears. 'I have missed my luncheon!' said the Imperial Geologist (he did not look as though he had missed many) dolefully. 'They have prepared none for me at home, and in a restaurant I cannot eat, because my stomach is delicate: if anything is in the least greasy or underdone or overdone, one feels rising, then, the bile: and one is dyspeptic for days!'

'Come home with me, then, Johanno,' said Eszterhazy.

'Gladly!'

One might ask, How far can a pullet go? but the pullet was after all intended merely as garnish to only one course of several; also a cook in Bella would sooner have suffered herself to be trampled by elephant cows rather than fail to provide a few Back-up Entrances, as they were called, in case of emergencies. A singularly greedy guest might become an Untoward Incident in a foreign *pension*: but not in a well-ordered house in Bella: What a compliment! God—who gives appetite—bless the man! and the order would be passed on, via an agreed-upon signal, to bring out one of the back-ups.

Going past the porte-cochère of the Great Hall, which was jammed with vehicles, Eszterhazy held up his hand and the red steam runabout darted forward

from a nearby passage; almost before it had come to a stop, Schwebel, the engineer, had vaulted into the back to stoke the anthracite: Eszterhazy took the tiller. His guest, an appreciative sniff for the cedar wood-work (beeswax 'compliments of prince Vlox'), sat beside him.

'Who's *that*?' asked an Usher of a Doorkeeper, watching the deft work with the steering-gear.

'He'm Doctors Eszterhazy, th' Emperor's wizard,' said Door-keeper to Usher.

'So *that's* him!—odd old bird!' And then they both had to jump as the delegations poured out, demanding their coaches, carriages, curricles, hacks, and troikas. None, however, demanded steam run-about.

'It will not offend you if we enter by way of the kitchen?' the doctor (although his doctorate was plural, he himself was singular...very singular) asked the professor.

Who answered that they might enter by way of the chimney. 'Can-not you hear my stomach growling? Besides, it is always a pleasure to visit a well-ordered kitchen.' Blumpkinn rang with pleasure the hand-bell given him to warn passers-by—the steamer was almost noiseless—and drivers of nervous horses.

'A moderate number of unannounced visits help keep a kitchen well-ordered.' Besides, with a temporary cook and a guest with a very delicate stomach, an inspection, however brief, might be a good idea: and, in a few minutes, there they were!—but what was this in the alley? a heavy country wagon—and at the door, someone whose canvas coat was speckled with feathers—someone stamping his feet and looking baffled. 'I tells you again that Poulterer Puckelhaube has told me to bring this country-fed bird, and to git a skilling and a half for it! 'Tain't my fault as I'm late: the roads about the Great Chamber was filled with kerritches.'

But, like the King of Iceland's oldest son, Malta Cook was having none. 'You's heard I'm only temporal here,' she said, hands on hips, 'and thinks to try your gammon on me!—but you'll get no skilling and a half at this door! The country chicking has already been delivered couple hours ago, with the other firm's compliments, and the foreign guest is eating of it now. Away with ye, and—' She caught sight of Eszterhazy, curtseyed, gestured towards the deliveryman, her mouth open for explanation and argument.

She was allowed no time. Eszterhazy said, 'Take the bird and pay for it, we'll settle the matter later.—Give him a glass of ale,' he called over his shoulder. Instantly the man's grievance vanished. The money would, after all, go to his employer. But the beer was his ... at least for a while.

At the table, napkin tucked into his open collar, sunburned and evidently quite content, sat Newton Charles ('New Chum') Enderson, calmly chewing. Equally calmly, he returned the just-cleaned-off bone to its platter, on which (or, if you prefer, whereon) he had neatly laid out the skeleton. Perhaps he had always done the same, even with the cockatoo and the kangaroo. Eszterhazy stared in intense disbelief. Blumpkinn's mouth was opening and closing like that of a barbel, or a carp. 'Welcome aboard,' said New Chum, look-ing up. 'Sorry you've missed it. The journey has given me quite an appetite.' At the end of the platter was a single, and slightly odd, feather. Malta had perhaps heard, if not more, of how to serve a

pheasant.

‘My God!’ cried Blumpkinn. ‘Look! There is the centra free as far as the sacrum, and the very long tail as well as the thin coracoid, all the ribs non-unciate and thin, neither birdlike nor very reptilian, the un-birdlike caudal appendage, the separate and unfused metacarpals, the independent fingers and claws.’

‘Not bad at all,’ said Enderson, touching the napkin to his lips. ‘As I’ve told you, I don’t know one bird from another, but this is not bad. Rather like bamboo chicken—goanna, or iguana, you would call it. Though a bit far north for that...but of course it must be imported! My compliments to the chef! By the way, I understand that the man who brought it said that there weren’t any more . . . whatever that means... You know how to treat a guest well, I must say!’

Contentedly, he broke off a bit of bread and sopped at the truffled gravy. Then he looked up again. ‘Oh, and speaking of compliments,’ he said, ‘who’s Prince Vlox?’

‘I see the French picture is missing,’ said Eszterhazy.