

Extracts from *The Hitch-Hikers' Guide to the Galaxy*

Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the western spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow sun. Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-two million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.

This planet has – or rather had – a problem, which was this: most of the people on it were unhappy for pretty much of the time. Many solutions were suggested for this problem, but most of these were largely concerned with the movements of small green pieces of paper, which is odd because on the whole it wasn't the small green pieces of paper that were unhappy.

And so the problem remained; lots of the people were mean, and most of them were miserable, even the ones with digital watches.

Many were increasingly of the opinion that they'd all made a big mistake in coming down from the trees in the first place.

And some said that even the trees had been a bad move, and that no one should ever have left the oceans.

And then, one Thursday, nearly two thousand years after one man had been nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change, one girl sitting on her own in a small cafe in Rickmansworth suddenly realized what it was that had been going wrong all this time, and she finally knew how the world could be made a good and happy place. This time it was right, it would work, and no one would have to get nailed to anything.

Sadly, however, before she could get to a phone to tell anyone about it, a terribly stupid catastrophe occurred, and the idea was lost forever.

This is not her story.

But it is the story of that terrible stupid catastrophe and some of its consequences.

*It is also the story of a book, a book called *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* – not an Earth book, never published on Earth, and until the terrible catastrophe occurred, never seen or heard of by any Earthman.*

Nevertheless, a wholly remarkable book.

In fact it was probably the most remarkable book ever to come out of the great publishing houses of Ursa Minor – of which no Earthman had ever heard either.

*Not only is it a wholly remarkable book, it is also a highly successful one – more popular than the *Celestial Home Care Omnibus*, better selling than *Fifty More Things to do in Zero Gravity*, and more controversial than *Oolon Colluphid's* trilogy of philosophical blockbusters *Where God Went Wrong*, *Some More of God's Greatest Mistakes* and *Who is this God Person Anyway?**

*In many of the more relaxed civilizations on the Outer Eastern Rim of the Galaxy, the *Hitchhiker's Guide* has already supplanted the great *Encyclopedia Galactica* as the standard repository of all knowledge and wisdom, for though it has many omissions and contains much that is apocryphal, or at least wildly inaccurate, it scores over the older, more pedestrian work in two important respects.*

*First, it is slightly cheaper; and secondly it has the words *Don't Panic* inscribed in large friendly letters on its cover.*

But the story of this terrible, stupid Thursday, the story of its extraordinary consequences, and the story of how these consequences are inextricably intertwined with this remarkable book begins very simply.

It begins with a house.

Chapter 1

The house stood on a slight rise just on the edge of the village. It stood on its own and looked over a broad spread of West Country farmland. Not a remarkable house by any means – it was about thirty years old, squattish, squarish, made of brick, and had four windows set in the front of a size and proportion which more or less exactly failed to please the eye.

The only person for whom the house was in any way special was Arthur Dent, and that was only because it happened to be the one he lived in. He had lived in it for about three years, ever since he had moved out of London because it made him nervous and irritable. He was about thirty as well, dark haired and never quite at ease with himself. The thing that used to worry him most was the fact that people always used to ask him what he was looking so worried about. He worked in local radio which he always used to tell his friends was a lot more interesting than they probably thought. It was, too – most of his friends worked in advertising.

On Wednesday night it had rained very heavily, the lane was wet and muddy, but the Thursday morning sun was bright and clear as it shone on Arthur Dent's house for what was to be the last time

It hadn't properly registered with Arthur that the council wanted to knock down his house and build an bypass instead.

At eight o'clock on Thursday morning Arthur didn't feel very good. He woke up blearily, got up, wandered blearily round his room, opened a window, saw a bulldozer, found his slippers, and stomped off to the bathroom to wash.

Toothpaste on the brush – so. Scrub.

Shaving mirror – pointing at the ceiling. He adjusted it. For a moment it reflected a second bulldozer through the bathroom window. Properly adjusted, it reflected Arthur Dent's bristles. He shaved them off, washed, dried, and stomped off to the kitchen to find something pleasant to put in his mouth. Kettle, plug, fridge, milk, coffee. Yawn.

Beeblebrox? President? Not the Zaphod Beeblebrox? Not the President? Many had seen it as a clinching proof that the whole of known creation had finally gone bananas.

Zaphod grinned and gave the boat an extra kick of speed.

Zaphod Beeblebrox, adventurer, ex-hippy, good timer, (crook? quite possibly), manic self-publicist, terribly bad at personal relationships, often thought to be completely out to lunch.

President?

No one had gone bananas, not in that way at least.

Only six people in the entire Galaxy understood the principle on which the Galaxy was governed, and they knew that once Zaphod Beeblebrox had announced his intention to run as President it was more or less a fait accompli: he was the ideal presidency fodder. *

What they completely failed to understand was why Zaphod was doing it.

He banked sharply, shooting a wild wall of water at the sun.

Today was the day; today was the day when they would realize what Zaphod had been up to. Today was what Zaphod Beeblebrox's Presidency was all about. Today was also his two hundredth birthday, but that was just another meaningless coincidence.

As he skipped his boat across the seas of Damogran he smiled quietly to himself about what a wonderful exciting day it was going to be. He relaxed and spread his two arms lazily across the seat back. He steered with an

*(*President: full title President of the Imperial Galactic Government.*

The term Imperial is kept though it is now an anachronism. The hereditary Emperor is nearly dead and has been so for many centuries. In the last moments of his dying coma he was locked in a stasis field which keeps him in a state of perpetual unchangingness. All his heirs are now long dead, and this means that without any drastic political upheaval, power has simply and effectively moved a rung or two down the ladder, and is now seen to be vested in a body which used to act simply as advisers to the Emperor – an elected Governmental assembly headed by a President elected by that assembly. In fact it vests in no such place.

The President in particular is very much a figurehead – he wields no real power what-

soever. He is apparently chosen by the government, but the qualities he is required to display are not those of leadership but those of finely judged outrage. For this reason the President is always a controversial choice, always an infuriating but fascinating character. His job is not to wield power but to draw attention away from it. On those criteria Zaphod Beeblebrox is one of the most successful Presidents the Galaxy has ever had – he has already spent two of his ten Presidential years in prison for fraud. Very very few people realize that the President and the Government have virtually no power at all, and of these very few people only six know whence ultimate political power is wielded. Most of the others secretly believe that the ultimate decision-making process is handled by a computer. They couldn't be more wrong.)

extra arm he'd recently fitted just beneath his right one to help improve his ski-boxing.

"Hey," he cooed to himself, "you're a real cool boy you." But his nerves sang a song shriller than a dog whistle.

The island of France was about twenty miles long, five miles across the middle, sandy and crescent shaped. In fact it seemed to exist not so much as an island in its own right as simply a means of defining the sweep and curve of a huge bay. This impression was heightened by the fact that the inner coastline of the crescent consisted almost entirely of steep cliffs. From the top of the cliff the land sloped slowly down five miles to the opposite shore.

On top of the cliffs stood a reception committee.

It consisted in large part of the engineers and researchers who had built the Heart of Gold – mostly humanoid, but here and there were a few reptiloid atomineers, two or three green slyph-like maximegalacticans, an octopoid physucturalist or two and a Hoolooovoo (a Hoolooovoo is a super-intelligent shade of the color blue). All except the Hoolooovoo were resplendent in their multicolored ceremonial lab coats; the Hoolooovoo had been temporarily re-fracted into a free standing prism for the occasion.

There was a mood of immense excitement thrilling through all of them. Together and between them they had gone to and beyond the furthest limits of physical laws, restructured the fundamental fabric of matter, strained, twisted and broken the laws of possibility and impossibility, but still the greatest excitement of all seemed to be to meet a man with an orange sash round his neck. (An orange sash was what the President of the Galaxy traditionally wore.) It might not even have made much difference to them if they'd known exactly how much power the President of the Galaxy actually wielded: none at all. Only six people in the Galaxy knew that the job of the Galactic President was not to wield power but to attract attention away from it.

Zaphod Beeblebrox was amazingly good at his job.

The crowd gasped, dazzled by sun and seamanship, as the Presidential speedboat zipped round the headland into the bay. It flashed and shone as it came skating over the sea in wide skidding turns.

In fact it didn't need to touch the water at all, because it was supported on a hazy cushion of ionized atoms – but just for effect it was fitted with thin finblades which could be lowered into the water. They slashed sheets of water hissing into the air, carved deep gashes into the sea which swayed crazily and sank back foaming into the boat's wake as it careered across the bay.

Zaphod loved effect: it was what he was best at.

Chapter 5

Prosthetic Vagon Jeltz was not a pleasant sight, even for other Vogons. His highly domed nose rose high above a small piggy forehead. His dark green rubbery skin was thick enough for him to play the game of Vagon Civil Service politics, and play it well, and waterproof enough for him to survive indefinitely at sea depths of up to a thousand feet with no ill effects.

Not that he ever went swimming of course. His busy schedule would not allow it. He was the way he was because billions of years ago when the Vogons had first crawled out of the sluggish primeval seas of Vogsphere, and had lain panting and heaving on the planet's virgin shores. . . when the first rays of the bright young Vogsol sun had shone across them that morning, it was as if the forces of evolution had simply given up on them there and then, had turned aside in disgust and written them off as an ugly and unfortunate mistake. They never evolved again; they should never have survived.

The fact that they did is some kind of tribute to the thickwilled slug-brained stubbornness of these creatures. Evolution? they said to themselves, Who needs it?, and what nature refused to do for them they simply did without until such time as they were able to rectify the grosser anatomical inconveniences with surgery.

Meanwhile, the natural forces on the planet Vogsphere had been working overtime to make up for their earlier blunder. They brought forth scintillating jewelled scuttling crabs, which the Vogons ate, smashing their shells with iron mallets; tall aspiring trees with breathtaking slenderness and colour which the Vogons cut down and burned the crab meat with; elegant gazellelike creatures with silken coats and dewy eyes which the Vogons would catch and sit on. They were no use as transport because their backs would snap instantly, but the Vogons sat on them anyway.

Thus the planet Vogsphere whiled away the unhappy millennia until the Vogons suddenly discovered the principles of interstellar travel. Within a few short Vog years every last Vagon had migrated to the Megabrantis cluster, the political hub of the Galaxy and now formed the immensely powerful backbone of the Galactic Civil Service. They have attempted to acquire learning, they have attempted to acquire style and social grace, but in most respects the modern Vagon is little different from his primitive forebears. Every year they import twenty-seven thousand scintillating jewelled scuttling crabs from their native planet and while away a happy drunken night smashing them to bits with iron mallets.

Prosthetic Vagon Jeltz was a fairly typical Vagon in that he was thoroughly vile. Also, he did not like hitchhikers.