

The background of the cover is a painterly illustration. It depicts a city skyline across a body of water. In the foreground, there's a sandy or muddy shore with some small, dark shapes that could be rocks or debris. A few boats are visible on the water. The city skyline in the middle ground includes several buildings, with a prominent one on the right that has a tall spire and a flag flying from a pole. The sky is filled with large, textured clouds in shades of grey, blue, and white. The overall style is reminiscent of a classic oil painting.

# Visitors

John Stewart

'It is difficult to know where to look for comparisons: Graham Greene, for its exquisite prose, or [Arthur C. Clarke], for its deftly imagined other-world politics, and alien beings as thinly disguised representatives of what humankind might one day aspire to'

Guardian online

# *Visitors*

John Stewart



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*In memory of  
Joan Crammond*

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# ***Prologue***

*'The resistance level is much higher, Captain.'*

*'Yes, we're down to interplanetary mode. When travelling within crowded planetary systems, intergalactic or even inter stellar modes are much too dangerous.'*

*'We must be getting close, Sir.'*

*'We are, Cadet Alpha. Your English is good, congratulations.'*

*'Thank you, Sir, the ban on any other language has been a good incentive.'*

*The Captain chuckled.*

*'Look at that, Sir!'*

*'That's Saturn and her frosty rings.'*

*'How many times have you been to the planet called Earth, Sir?'*

*'This is the third time. The first time I was, like you, a cadet. But this is the first time we will be showing ourselves.'*

*'Will it be dangerous?'*

*'Tricky maybe, but not dangerous. I studied British history at university: their law forbids assault and imprisonment without due process. As long as we keep calm we'll be all right.'*

*'But why are we showing ourselves?'*

*'The Chief Elder says, and I agree, that it is unlawful to take without giving. We have taken for a long time, now it is time to give.'*

*'But they don't know we've been taking!'*

*'That is irrelevant: the law will not be mocked.'*



*'Sorry, Sir!'*

*'Don't be sorry. It is good to speak your mind, for in doing so thoughts can be refined. It is one Universe and an insular tribal attitude is inappropriate. Look, do you see that bright spot in front of us?'*

*'Yes, Sir.'*

*'Well that's it; that's the Earth.'*

*'It's coming up pretty fast!'*

*'Yes, it's time for approach mode.'*

*The Cadet watched fascinated as the Earth grew slowly and revealed its beauty.*

*'It's amazing, Sir, a jewel without a rival! How did we find it in the first place?'*

*'Many years ago our most renowned Chief Elder told us where to look.'*

*'How did he know?'*

*'He knew. That is all we know!'*

# ***Chapter One***

*Visitors from* a distant planet unexpectedly arrived. These people had enormous power and our puny defensive systems they neutralised with ease. They told us repeatedly that they'd come in peace and would quickly leave once they had observed our current modes of government and philosophy. The Military who first interviewed them were incredulous and found it difficult to believe, as no space vehicle had been revealed. They explained that they weren't permitted to expose their craft. We didn't believe them and they patiently repeated their story, but never were there any hints of violence. There were no laws that set down rules of how they might be treated, so they were housed like any immigrants who entered by illegal means. On the morning when the news first broke, the Government treated the matter as a fanciful rumour and awaited confirmation, but the Prime Minister, who was at a European summit, called a Cabinet meeting and rushed home.

The Aliens were strangely similar to the human form but their eyes had something special: a deep pool-like tranquillity. Clearly their intellectual and perceptive abilities were of a most advanced nature. Yet they behaved with disarming modesty. They made no complaints about the Spartan nature of their quarters, nor did they make demands or seek a meeting with authority. They merely awaited events.

The media rush was almost instant, but when the TV icons interviewed these beings they simply could not match their intellect. Aggressive questioning had no impact and rebounded upon the questioner. Interest grew, as did respect. Still, many felt that they were simply frauds, and

fears of an Alien takeover persisted. The rumour that the small research group were just the herald of a harsh invasion gathered pace. On the streets special-edition newspapers whipped up tensions. The Share Index plummeted and the Stock Exchange closed trading.

By midday opposition leaders and the popular press were demanding action. Their campaign bordered on the hysterical and the Prime Minister Bob Shaw, a square-framed Baldwin-like figure, booked airtime on all the TV channels. This time he would ask the questions!

\*

At 6.30pm the cameras beamed in on the familiar Downing Street scene and right on time the Prime Minister and the Alien leader took their seats – easy chairs placed on either side of the ornate fireplace. The PM was not one you'd call well dressed. His suit always looked as if it needed pressing, but a discerning eye might guess that, even if it had been newly pressed, it would still have had the familiar office-worn appearance.

The Alien's tall trim frame was suited as if by Savile Row. Nothing stood out, although he didn't quite look British. When he removed his tinted glasses though, his eyes betrayed his special nature.

\*

'May I first welcome you on behalf of Her Majesty and the peoples of this island, and may I apologise for this tardy official greeting.' The Prime Minister's words were measured and calm.

'You are most gracious, Prime Minister,' the Alien acknowledged easily.

Shaw was shocked but was too good a 'pro' to show it. The urbanity of this being was amazing.

‘Sir, Your English is so *English* that I’m tempted to ask what UK university you attended.’

The Alien laughed easily.

‘That is a compliment, Prime Minister, and I do like your English sense of humour!’

‘May I ask your name? For I must confess no one was able to tell me. In fact I don’t think we enquired! As you may imagine, we were rather taken by surprise!’

‘I must apologise for we did arrive unannounced!’ The Alien smiled disarmingly. ‘Now, my name – I am the leader of a small band of ten. You can call me Captain. My own name is of little matter.’

‘Well, Captain, you will be aware that many of our citizens are anxious that your visit may be the herald of a larger force. They clamour for assurances and I must say that I understand their fears. Sir, can we be reassured? And, Sir, where is your spacecraft? No one has reported a sighting!’

‘I appreciate your candour, Prime Minister. I can only say that your fears are groundless.’ The captain smiled. ‘Sir, few of our citizens are anxious to leave their planet paradise for what is, to say the very least, a long and tedious, if not uncertain, journey. We may have mastered many of Creation’s laws but not them all! Now, you asked about our spacecraft: it is close, should we need to be evacuated, but is protected by an invisibility screen and fitted with a high-pitched sound to repel living creatures. We are forbidden to cause harm or injury and, as our craft is specially protected, even touching it can be dangerous!’ The Alien smiled again.

Shaw was amazed: this man, creature, or whatever he was, could grace the high table at any Oxford college.

‘Well, Captain, you have answered my questions. Thank you, your word is good enough for me.’

‘Prime Minister, your great financial City says it for me: “My word is my bond.”’

‘How, Sir, do you know our language and our customs so well? To me, your grasp of things is quite uncanny.’

‘Over many ages we developed a facility for near to instant assimilation. It is really not so difficult as it seems. A lake that is completely still allows a perfect reflection. So it is with the mind. Let’s put it another way. While you have developed the computer, quite miraculously, we have developed aids that advance the felicity of the mind. We didn’t show ourselves immediately but gave ourselves a little time to watch and listen. “Cramming” is the word I think you use! Sir, we have come to your planet to learn, and hopefully to be of use.’ The Alien smiled benignly but gave no further explanation.

Shaw also smiled but thought it prudent not to follow up. Instead he asked another question.

‘You referred to your “Planet Paradise”: are the terrain and climate similar to here?’

‘Remarkably similar. Life forms such as us need rather special conditions, so it’s not surprising therefore that conditions are alike. Though we lead a much more simple life.’

Prime Minister Shaw nodded pensively. Questions were crowding his mind, but being prime-time coverage he was circumspect. The main aim was to calm the agitation in the people. The arrival of beings from another planet was momentous; even so, it was business as usual. This he saw to be a premier duty. That said, there was a unique opportunity to learn from these remarkable beings. Had we the capacity though? That was the question.

In the meantime Shaw kept his questions simple and straightforward. Did they like the food? Were their sleeping habits similar? Were their family customs similar?

The Alien’s answers were completely disarming. Indeed this was exactly what the PM wanted. The people would be reassured. These Visitors didn’t pose a threat and we should treat them as honoured guests. Tomorrow it would be business as usual! That was his hope, but he had been in public life too long to be complacent. There would be

trouble. It was inevitable and it would need his every ounce of subtlety to thwart the wreckers.

The Prime Minister's probing continued to emphasise the brevity of the Aliens' stay and their lack of aggression. Indeed the nation stood to gain much from the knowledge the Visitors were so generously sharing. It was good diplomatic stuff. 'Repeat your message three times', his father had told him. 'If you're lucky, they might get it on the third hearing!'

\*

When Shaw was perfectly sure all recording apparatus was disconnected, he leaned across to his visitor.

'Now we can talk!' he said quietly.

The Alien smiled knowingly. Clearly he understood the political subtlety.

'I hope it is convenient for you to dine with us this evening. My wife is busy preparing things and we trust the food will be to your liking. If not, we would fully understand, of course. So there's no need to suffer in the cause of diplomacy!'

The Visitor laughed lightly

'Mr Shaw, I am honoured, not least by the trust you're showing in this creature from another world. But then, this is Britain!' The Visitor's smile widened.

'Poor old Britain, assailed by never-ending rules and regulations - not to mention the tyranny of the PC vigilantes. Sorry, I'm assailing you with obscurities!'

'No, I understand. Your democracy is feeding the popular will with all that it demands, instead of what it needs.'

'Good Lord! How do you know such things? And how have you mastered the English language so completely?'

'This isn't the first mission to your planet, but it's the first to declare itself. We've had ample time to study your customs.'

‘Even so, your facility is remarkable. I think it’s time to go upstairs to the flat. My wife will be waiting.’

## ***Chapter Two***

*The Captain* was impressed and said so. Here he was alone with the Prime Minister and his wife, and not another witness present. This was trust indeed and marked a man with faith in his perception.

Initial conversation centred on the families of the hosts and guest; it was very much as if the Vicar had come round to supper. Eventually Shaw's curiosity could not be contained.

'Presiding over a Cabinet discussion on the Budget I find purgatorial.'

'Ah, you've got me on that word!'

'I've scored one at last!' Shaw chuckled while giving the meaning. 'How do you deal with the nightmare of taxation?' he questioned.

'You may find this difficult to imagine, but we don't have taxation as such. We have rent-collection centres and, when there is a special need, donations are invited which often build up a reserve well above the immediate requirement.'

'But how do you pay for education and health services?'

'We have no government-funded health or education service. There are centres for those unable to help themselves, but there the need is small.'

'But how...?' Shaw was baffled. 'The need for welfare funds to combat poverty... How...?'

'There may be simplicity - that is mostly by choice - but there is little poverty, and those who are in poverty are mostly those who cannot help themselves.'

'I am totally baffled. You cannot be a primitive, simplistic society, for people who can send heralds halfway across the



universe are the very opposite!’ Shaw shook his head. ‘How do you do it? Your citizens must be uncommonly advanced.’

‘And you must have a powerful belief system,’ Mrs Shaw interjected.

‘Yes, faith is often needed, but truth transcends all.’

To Mrs Shaw the gentle eyes of the Visitor said it all, and she had no doubt that what he said was so.

The Prime Minister was reflective. This man was not a charlatan. He would bet his life on that. But what of war and strife: had they banished that? There had to be a snag somewhere!

‘What about criminal activity? How do you deal with disruptive elements? What about war?’

‘Constant vigilance is the only answer, and when it’s spotted crime must never walk abroad unpunished.’

‘And war?’ Shaw pressed.

‘War happens when a tyrant thinks he sees an easy victory. So prudence and vigilance are essential. Complacency, in this respect, *is* criminal!’

The Captain wasn’t a dewy-eyed tree-hugger, Shaw concluded quickly.

‘I’m still puzzled by your system of collecting revenue,’ he added.

The Visitor smiled. ‘Can I ask you a question?’

‘Of course.’

‘How valuable is the land on which your great financial city rests?’

‘Unbelievably valuable!’

‘Who collects the value?’

‘The landlords.’

‘And who creates this value?’

Deep in his memory Shaw trawled up a conversation he once had had with someone on the hustings. He had dismissed it then for he had seen no votes in it. Now the import of it all rushed back.

‘Your question: who creates the rent? Everyone who works there; the whole community,’ he answered.

‘As you say here, that would be a tidy sum!’

‘Very tidy! I remember now, my experts told me that this idea was “old hat”.’

‘“Old hat”?’

‘That’s another one!’

The Captain laughed

‘They meant out of date.’

‘Natural law is never out of date.’

‘Oh dear, the academics won’t like that. “Natural” is “out”!’

‘Tell them that Nature says it’s *in*!’

Shaw and his wife laughed heartily.

‘This is a most enjoyable evening, Prime Minister. Laughter is so healthy!’

‘Captain, I know what the objectors will say. When collecting the rent, what about the twentieth floor?’ Shaw continued.

‘We have the same thing, but the twentieth floor is of no concern to the rent-collecting service. They are only interested in the person or body who holds the title to the land area; for, no matter how sophisticated, the building rests on land. In your case it would be the freehold owner. You even have a name for it: ground rent. We have long since rid ourselves of those lingering vestiges of land ownership but you still have leases, sub-leases and so on. Such factors cause interim difficulties but they would soon settle down.’

‘And ground rent funds the working of the state?’

‘Yes, except for emergencies, as already mentioned.’

‘Captain, I find it difficult to credit. Welfare is such a massive burden!’

‘When men’s labour is free of tax it brings about a revolution and, when those with enterprise have easy access to a business site, commerce mushrooms. People are

working as free men. Believe me, it makes a huge difference. The welfare burden will shrink, the education bill will shrink, and citizens at last will have the dignity of choosing their health care and their children's education. They'll be no longer in receipt of charity, or have the anxiety of cruel waiting lists. Charity breeds dependence, but give the people justice and they will rise to it.'

'Captain, this is all very well in the long term, or for yourselves who have had it in place perhaps for many decades, but we by necessity must proceed slowly. Immediate implementation would be a tyranny!'

'Having observed your system, it would take years to introduce on a significant scale. Yet it is the natural system. No other way can you avoid the basic cause of poverty in this age. The old manorial system that my ancestors once observed is past.'

Shaw was once more shocked. Had they been visiting Earth since the Middle Ages? Who were these people? He had much more to learn.

'Clearly, Captain, yours is a race of great achievement. Why then have you shown such continuing interest in our planet? For, as you've just said, you were observing us in the medieval period.'

'We owe you much for you have a genius when it comes to spiritual insight,' the Captain answered quietly. 'Even now, your enlightened ones preach the unity of spirit that unites us all. Yes, we learned much, and we wish to show our gratitude.'

Shaw waited for the Captain to elaborate but he remained silent. Eventually it was Mrs Shaw who spoke.

'How do you intend to act, Sir?'

'We have no plans. We can respond to questions but that is all. As you say in your military circles, it's our rules of engagement.' The countenance of the Visitor seemed even more benign.

'What questions do you think we should be asking?'

The Visitor laughed.

‘You’re not a politician for nothing, Mr Shaw.’

‘I continue to be amazed at your facility with our language and the idiom – well, that is really amazing!’

‘Britain was my subject at what you would call university.’

‘Now, Sir, what have we forgotten? What does this country need?’

‘The centre, the core of certainty is being eroded. We have watched this disturbing trend with sadness.’

‘This, and the fanatical counter-trend burning in the Muslim states, concern me greatly, but every time I speak I’m shredded by the media.’

“‘Shredded’? – Yes, I get the meaning! Does the shredding worry you?’

‘If it did I would be dead.’

‘Keep speaking, Sir. You’ll be planting seeds and they will grow. Britain is a fertile land.’

## ***Chapter Three***

*The House of Commons* was packed. All the seats were occupied and there were many standing on the floor by the Speaker's chair and by the entrance to the lobby. In the gallery the Lords were assembled. The buzz of conversation was feverish. Then suddenly a hush descended. The Prime Minister had arrived exactly on time.

'The Prime Minister...' the Speaker intoned and Bob Shaw rose to his feet.

'Mr Speaker, My Lords and Ladies and Honourable Members, this is indeed a momentous day and we have perhaps the biggest television audience this place has ever drawn. So I hope you will behave yourselves!'

There was a ripple of obliging chuckles.

'We are indeed honoured by the presence of our guests and awed by their achievements in travelling from their distant planet. Now, I must tell you that this is not the first time they have visited us. On other occasions they did not show themselves but this time they have. I must emphasise that at no time have they shown aggression or caused harm to this planet. Their interest has been in our customs and in our genius for spiritual and philosophical penetration, and for this they said they were eternally grateful. So I don't think that this is something the MOD need see as an emergency.'

An MP stood up and Shaw gave way.

'Who were the philosophers and spiritual leaders the Alien mentioned?'

'The captain of the Visitors dined at Downing Street last evening. My good wife did the cooking and it was a most pleasant evening. Afterwards I accompanied him to his MOD

quarters and on the journey he listed those that he had studied: Plato, the Johannine Gospel and the Brahmins of India. He was also much entertained by the writings of the Sufi master Rumi. He also named the Chinese Taoist master Chuang Tzu. I'm ashamed to say he knew much more than I. Now, I'm sorry but we didn't manage to discuss the spiritual leaders.'

The MP didn't follow up and Shaw continued.

'We will be moving our guests to more appropriate accommodation soon and no doubt there will be an opportunity for more discussion. This is a short statement. Now I'm open to questions.'

'Is he a good Socialist, Prime Minister?'

Laughter followed the likeable MP's question.

'Better than the Honourable Gentleman! No taxes are collected!'

'From the rich, you mean!'

'No, from anybody!'

'Well, if it helps the workers, I'm for it!'

'Good.'

'But where do they get the funds?' Another MP questioned.

'From the rental value.'

'Prime Minister, this is the land value theory. I've had certain people pestering me with this idea. It's primitive and impractical,' a further Member intervened with passion.

'Well the Honourable Member may wish to reflect how our visitors got here. That certainly wasn't primitive.'

'Freehold property is the foundation of the state!'

'Tell that to the young who can't afford a mortgage for a start-up home!'

That's another enemy he's made, the Chancellor thought, sitting gnome-like at the PM's side.

The Foreign Secretary sat forward on his bench and looked across: a well-groomed man, whose naturally cultured ways were perfect for his role.