

Custom Fitting

James White

For many years Hewlitt had been in the habit of spending half an hour sunning himself at the entrance to his shop when the sunlight was available in sufficient strength. The period was determined by the length of time it took for the sun to clear the eaves of the buildings on his side of the street and to move far enough out to necessitate his pulling out the shop's awning so that the cloth on display would not fade. He spent the time watching the passersby--hoping that some of them wouldn't—and anything else of interest. Usually there was nothing interesting to see, but today was an exception.

A large, plain furniture van, preceded by a police car and followed closely by an Electricity Department truck, turned into his street from the main road. The presence of the police vehicle was explained by the fact that the convoy was moving in the wrong direction along a one-way street. When the procession finally halted, the removals van was directly facing him.

For perhaps a minute there was nothing to see except the reflection of himself and his doorway in the dark, glossy flanks of the van. It was the slightly distorted picture of a thin and rather ridiculous figure wearing a black jacket and waistcoat with striped trousers, a small flower in the lapel, and a tape measure—the outward sign of his profession—hanging loosely from his neck. The lettering on the door behind the figure was executed in gold leaf in a bold italic script and said, in reverse:

GEORGE L. HEWLITT,

TAILOR

Suddenly—as if some hypothetical film director had shouted "Action!"—everything happened at once.

Two senior police officers carrying traffic-diversion signs left their vehicle and moved in opposite directions to seal off each end of the street. The Electricity Department truck disgorged a gang of neatly overalled workmen, who quickly began unloading collapsible screening, a nightwatchman's hut, and a man wearing a well-tailored suit of dark gray worsted and a tie which was strictly establishment. He also wore a very worried expression as he glanced up and down the street and at the windows overlooking it.

"Good morning, Mr. Hewlitt," the man said, coming forward. "My name is Fox. I'm with the Foreign Office. I, ah, would like to consult you professionally. May I come inside?"

Hewlitt inclined his head politely and followed him into the shop.

For a few minutes nothing else was said because Fox was pacing nervously about the interior, staring at the shelves of neatly rolled cloth lengths, fingering the pattern books which were placed strategically on the polished wooden counters, and examining the paneling and crystal-clear mirrors in the big fitting room. While the Foreign Office official was looking over the premises, Hewlitt was studying Fox with equal attention.

Fox was of medium height, slimly built, with a head-forward tendency and prominent shoulder blades. From the small but noticeable lateral crease behind the jacket collar, it was obvious that he tried to correct the HF and PSB tendency by carrying himself unnaturally erect. Plainly Fox's tailor had had problems, and Hewlitt wondered if he was about to inherit them.

"How may I help you, sir?" Hewlitt said when his visitor had finally come to rest. He used a tone which

was friendly but one with that touch of condescension which very plainly said that it would be Hewlitt's decision whether or not he would build a jacket around Fox's prominent shoulder blades.

"I am not the client, Mr. Hewlitt," Fox said impatiently. "He is waiting outside. However, this matter must be treated in the strictest confidence—kept absolutely secret, in fact, for the next two weeks. After that you may discuss it with whom you please.

"From our thorough if necessarily hasty inquiries," the Foreign Office official went on, "we know that you live above these premises with your wife, who is also your seamstress and a partial cripple. We also know that your work is competent, if a little old-fashioned as regards styling, and that your stock is remarkably lacking in materials using man-made fibers. For many years your financial position has not been good, and I should say at this juncture that your silence as well as your workmanship will be very highly paid.

"The garment itself should present no difficulty," Fox ended, "since all that is required is a fairly well-fitting horse blanket."

Coldly, Hewlitt said, "I am completely lacking in experience where horse blankets are concerned, Mr. Fox."

"You are being proud and unnecessarily stubborn, Mr. Hewlitt. This is a very important client, and may I remind you that across the street there is a branch of a well-known multiple tailoring company which is also capable of doing the job."

"I agree," said Hewlitt dryly. "That company could do a pretty good job—on a horse blanket."

Fox smiled faintly, but before he could reply one of the workmen entered and said, "The screens are in position, sir, and the van is blocking the view from the other side of the street. Now we need the pole to pull out the sun awning. That will hide the shop front from upper-story windows on the other side of the street."

Hewlitt pointed toward the recess behind the display window where the awning pole was kept.

"Thank you, sir," said the workman in the tones of a senior public servant who is addressing a lowly member of the public he serves, then he turned away. "Wait," said Fox, visibly coming to a decision. "When you've done that, ask

His Excellency if he would be good enough to come in, please."

The strict secrecy being observed, the Foreign Office involvement, and the type of garment required had led Hewlitt to expect some highly controversial political figure: an overweight person from an underfed nation who was intent on expressing his individuality and independence by wearing an English-tailored native garment. Such a person might well be frightened of an assassin's bullet and feel it necessary to take these elaborate precautions: but that, after all, was not any of Hewlitt's business. But when he saw the client...

I'm dreaming, he told himself firmly.

The creature resembled a centaur, complete with hooves and a long, streaming tail. At first glance the torso from the waist up resembled that of a human being: but the musculature of the arms, shoulders, and chest was subtly different, and the hands were five-digited, each comprised of three fingers and two opposable thumbs. The head, carried erect above a very thick neck, was made to seem disproportionately small. The face was dominated by two large, soft, brown eyes that somehow made

the slits, protuberances, and fleshy petals which comprised the other features visually acceptable.

Apart from a large medallion suspended around its neck, the being wore no clothing. Its skin was a mottled pinkish-brown color, and the creature twitched continually as if to dislodge invisible flies. It was obviously male.

"Your Excellency," said Fox smoothly, "may I present Mr. George Hewlitt. He is a tailor, or maker of clothing, who will produce for you garments suitable for your stay on Earth."

Instinctively Hewlitt put out his hand. He discovered that his client's grip was firm, the digits warm and bony, and the way the lower thumb curled upward into his palm was indescribable but not unpleasant. For some odd reason he could no longer think of the being as an "it."

"The initial requirement," Fox said briskly, "is for a garment which will be comfortable and will keep His Excellency warm during the presentation ceremonies and socializing that will follow. The garment should be black, edged with gold or silver braid, perhaps, and should carry pseudo-heraldic decorations. No existing family crests can be used, obviously. He will also require a second garment, less formal, for use during sightseeing tours out-of-doors."

"A braided and decorated horse blanket, then," said Hewlitt, "and a plain one for walking out. But if you could tell me the kind of function His Excellency is to attend, I would be in a better position to produce something suitable."

Fox shook his head. "Security."

"I can, if necessary, work blindfolded and with one arm tied behind my back," Hewlitt said, "but I do not produce my best work under those conditions. However, if His Excellency would kindly follow me into the fitting room?"

With a soft, irregular thumping of hooves the client, accompanied by Fox, followed into the fitting room and stood looking at himself in the angled mirrors. Rarely had Hewlitt seen a customer more ill at ease. The other's hide was twitching and tightening along his back and flanks before Hewlitt had even laid the tape on him.

Without being obtrusive about it, Hewlitt studied the twitching hide, looking for insects or other evidence of parasitic presences. Relieved at not finding any, he thought for a moment, then switched on the wall heaters, which were never used during the summer months. Within a few minutes the room was uncomfortably warm and the twitching had stopped.

While Hewlitt went to work with his tape measure and pad, he asked, "I assume that my client's home planet is warmer than Earth?"

"Yes," said Fox. "Our weather at present would approximate to one of their sunny days in late autumn."

From small of back to root of tail. 63 inches, Hewlitt wrote carefully. He said, "In cool weather they wear clothing, then?"

"Yes, a form of toga wrapped around their bodies in a loose spiral, with—Oh, now I see why you switched on the heaters. I should have thought of that; it was very remiss of me. But His Excellency does not want to wear his native clothing for very good reasons, so he thought it better to suffer a little discomfort rather than to take the risk of your being influenced, even unconsciously, by his native dress. It is most important that he wear clothing which is made and styled on Earth."

From center line back to foreleg knee joint, 42 inches, Hewlitt wrote. To Fox he said, "The requirement

is for a blanket-like garment, but surely my client will require additional clothing if he is to feel—"

"Just the blanket, Mr. Hewlitt."

"If the positions were reversed," said Hewlitt patiently, "you would no doubt feel reasonably warm in a blanket; but you would feel much more comfortable if you were wearing shorts as well."

Irritably, Fox said, "Please follow instructions, Hewlitt. Your fee will be generous, regardless of how many or how few garments you make for His Excellency. Your attempts to drum up extra business is a waste of your time and ours."

"The majority of civilized people on Earth wear undergarments," said Hewlitt, "and unless climatic conditions, religious beliefs, or the dictates of local fashion rule otherwise, I should think that the same applies on other worlds."

"You are being argumentative, uncooperative, and you are introducing unnecessary complications into what is a very simple set of instructions," said Fox angrily. "Let me remind you that we can still go across the street!"

"Please do so," said Hewlitt.

Fox and Hewlitt glared at each other for several seconds while the alien, his features unreadable by virtue of their complete alienness, turned his outside brown eyes on each of them in turn.

Suddenly a soft, gobbling noise issued from one of the fleshy slits in his face and, simultaneously and much louder, a pleasant baritone voice spoke from the ornament suspended from the alien's neck. It said, "Perhaps I can resolve this difficulty, gentlemen. It seems to me that Mr. Hewlitt has displayed qualities of observation, good sense, and concern for the comfort of his customer, myself. Therefore, I would prefer him to continue to act as my tailor providing he is willing to do so."

Fox swallowed, then said weakly, "Security, Your Excellency. We agreed that you would not speak to any member of the public until...the day."

"My apologies, Mr. Fox," the alien replied through his translation device, "but on my world a specialist like Mr. Hewlitt is considered something more than a member of the public."

Turning to Hewlitt, he went on, "I would be most grateful if you could give the matter of my underwear your attention. However, for reasons which Mr. Fox would prefer to remain secret for the present, this garment must also be of Earth material and styling. Is this possible?"

Hewlitt bowed slightly and said, "Of course, sir."

"Not sir!" said Fox, obviously angered because his instructions had been ignored by the alien. "This is His Excellency the Lord Scrennagle of Dutha—"

Scrennagle held up one double-thumbed hand as he said politely, "Pardon the interruption. That is only an approximation of my rank and title. 'Sir' is sufficiently respectful and conversationally much less cumbersome." "Yes, Your Excellency," said Fox.

Hewlitt produced a swatch of patterns and a style book from which Scrennagle chose a soft lambswool in pale cream which would not, the tailor assured them, react in any fashion with his skin. The style plates fascinated him, and when Hewlitt began to sketch similar designs modified to fit his centaur-like body, the alien was practically breathing down the tailor's neck.

Polite questioning had elicited the facts that Scrennagle insisted on dressing himself and that the area of skin covering the spine between waist and tail was the part of his body most susceptible to cold.

"If you wouldn't mind, sir," said Hewlitt at that point, "I would like you to advise me regarding the positioning of fastenings, openings for the elimination of body wastes, and so on...."

Scrennagle could twist the upper part of his body so that his hands could reach either flank as far back as the tail, although he could only see the lower end of his back. The undergarment which Hewlitt had to devise would have to be stepped into and pulled up on to the fore and hind legs in turn. It would be double-backed and buttoned through, with one wide flap of cloth going over the back to the opposite flank and fastening there, while the other flap passed over the back in the opposite direction to button on the other flank—rather like a double-breasted suit worn back-to-front. Scrennagle said that the double thickness of cloth at the back would be very comfortable, the local temperature being what it was; and he found no fault in the more complicated flap and fastening arrangements for the fly and rear.

He was politely insistent, however, that his tail should not be even partially concealed. There were strong psychological reasons for this, apparently.

"I quite understand, sir," said Hewlitt. "And now if you will stand quite still I shall measure you. The dimensions and contour descriptions required will be much more complex than those needed for the blankets. Once I have drafted a properly fitting pattern for the garment, however, making additional ones will present no problems. Initially a set of four undergarments should be sufficient to—"

"Hewlitt—!" Fox began.

"No gentleman," Hewlitt said very quietly, "no matter how high or low his station, would undertake a major journey with just one set of underwear."

There was, of course, no reply to that; and Hewlitt resumed measuring his client. While he worked he told Scrennagle exactly what he was doing and why. He even went so far as to discuss the weather in his attempts to make his client relax bodily so that he would not shape the garment to a figure that was being held in an unnatural pose through tension.

"I intend making the leg sections reach less than halfway between the hip joints and knees, sir," he said at one point. "This will give the maximum comfort and warmth commensurate with the length of the over-garment. However, it would assist me greatly if I knew something more about the purpose of this blanket—what movements you would be making in it, whether or not you are expecting to be photographed, the geographical or architectural surroundings—so that the garment will not look out of place."

"You're fishing for information," said Fox sharply. "Please desist."

Hewlitt ignored him and said to Scrennagle, "You can rely on my discretion, sir."

"I know that," said Scrennagle. Turning so that he could see Fox in the fitting-room mirror, he went on: "A certain amount of curiosity is natural in these circumstances, and if Mr. Hewlitt has been entrusted with the secret of my presence in this city, surely the reason for my being here is a minor additional confidence which should not overstrain his capacity for—"

"With respect, Your Excellency," said Fox, "these matters must not be made public until all the necessary preparations have been made."

Hewlitt wrote *Girth at forelegs, 46 inches*. Controlling his exasperation, he said, "If the material, finish,

and decoration of these garments are to fit the occasion—an important occasion no doubt—I really should be told something about it."

There was silence for a moment, then Scrennagle and his translation device made noises which were possibly the equivalent of clearing an alien throat. His head went up and he stood very still as he said, "As the accredited representative of Dutha and of the Galactic Federation on Earth, I shall be presenting my credentials at the Court of St. James with the usual attendant ceremonies. In the evening of the same day there will be a reception at which the Sovereign will also be present. Although I am officially only an ambassador, the honors will be similar to those accorded a visiting head of state. The reception will be covered by the media, and interviews will be given following the official..."

Hewlitt was no longer listening to him. His sense of outrage was so great that no word could filter through to his mind with any meaning in it. Quietly he excused himself to Scrennagle; then to Fox he said, "Could I have a private word with you, outside?"

Without waiting for a reply he stalked out of the fitting room and across to the door, which he held open so that Fox could precede him into the hallway. Then he closed the door firmly, so firmly that the glass shattered and tinkled onto the porch tiling.

"And for this," he whispered fiercely, "you want me to make a—a *horse blanket*?"

Just as fiercely, Fox replied, "Believe it or not, I sympathize with your feelings. But this could be the most important event in human history and *it must go well!* Not just for Scrennagle's sake. What we do here will be the yardstick, the example, for embassies all over the world; and they must have no room for criticism. Some of them will feel that they should have had the first visit, and would welcome the chance to criticize. They must not be given that chance."

One of the Special Branch men in the too-clean overalls came onto the porch, attracted by the sound of breaking glass. Fox waved him away, then went on, "Of course he should wear more than a horse blanket. I know that as well as you do. But I didn't want you to know how important this is. Apart from the danger of a leak, a very small risk in your case, I didn't want you to worry about the job so much that you would go to pieces.

"At the same time," he went on harshly, "we cannot afford to have him appear ridiculous, to look like a cross between a dressed-up horse and a tail-coated chimpanzee from a circus. He is far too important an individual, and this is much too important an occasion for our planet and our race, for us to risk anything going wrong."

More quietly he went on, "Scrennagle wants to make a good first impression, naturally; but we as a species must also make a good impression on him. So it is probably safer in many respects to let him wear a blanket, even though it lacks both imagination and dignity. But, Hewlitt, if you want to tailor something more elaborate for the first ambassador from the stars, it must be exactly right for the occasion. Do you want to take on such a heavy responsibility?"

Hewlitt's vocal equipment seemed to be completely paralyzed by a combination of extreme anxiety and sheer joy at what was the ultimate challenge not only to an individual, but to a member of one of the oldest crafts known to mankind. He nodded.

Fox's relief was obvious. He said, very seriously, "You are assuming a large part of the responsibility which is properly mine. I'm grateful, and if you have any suggestions which might help..."

"Even if they are none of my business?" Hewlitt asked; then he added, "My *tailoring* business, that is."

"Go on," Fox said warily.

"We were discussing dressed-up horses just now," Hewlitt went on. "My client resembles a horse much more than he does a human being. He is too much of a diplomat to complain; but put yourself in his place for a moment and think of the effect on you of the pomp and pageantry, the transport arrangements and—"

"Scrennagle has already studied and adapted himself to the more personal aspects of our civilization," said Fox. "At meals he lies with legs folded underneath his body, allowing his erect torso to rise to a comfortable height for eating and conversation. Since he has no lap, the napkin remains folded by his plate. Where toilet facilities are concerned—"

"I was thinking," said Hewlitt, "of how he might feel about horses pulling him or their being ridden by human beings. I would suggest that a state limousine rather than a coach be used, and that the escort and guards be chosen from regiments other than the Household Cavalry or Horse Guards. There are several physiological similarities between Scrennagle and terrestrial horses. Not as many as those between an ape and a human being; but it might be better not to have too many animals around which closely resemble the visiting ambassador, wouldn't you say?"

"I *would* say," Fox said, and swore quietly. "Somebody should have thought of that."

"Somebody just did," Hewlitt said, opening the door and motioning Fox to precede him over the broken glass and back to the fitting room, where the most important client an Earth tailor had ever had was waiting and gently stamping all four of his feet.

"My apologies for the delay, sir," said Hewlitt politely, "but I now have a clearer idea of what is expected of me and of *you*, sir. Before I resume measuring, do you have any allergies toward certain materials, or any particularly sensitive areas, which might cause you discomfort?"

Scrennagle looked at Fox, who said, "We have investigated this matter in great detail; and there is a long list of items which could cause trouble—some of them serious trouble—if they were allowed to remain in contact with His Excellency's skin for long periods.

"The situation is this," he continued. "Extraterrestrial pathogens cannot live in human bodies, and vice versa. This means that we cannot possibly contract a disease from Scrennagle and he is likewise impervious to our germs. However, purely chemical reactions are a different matter. One of the things likely to cause His Excellency to break out in a rash or worse is the synthetic fiber used in clothing, virtually all kinds of synthetics. You see the problem?"

Hewlitt nodded. The ambassador's underwear, shirts, ties, and socks would have to be made from pure wool, cotton, or real silk; the suiting materials would have to be woolen worsted and, for the casuals, Harris or Irish Thornproof tweed. Bone buttons would be required and zip fasteners made from metal rather than nylon. Trimmings, the canvas stiffening, the wadding for shaping and softening the outlines would also have to be non-synthetic; and the thread used to hold everything together would have to be the old-style sewing cotton rather than nylon thread. He could see the problem, all right, and like most big problems this one was composed of a lot of little ones.

"One of the reasons why you were chosen for this job," said Fox, "was that you were old-fashioned enough in your ideas to keep such things in stock. But frankly, I was worried in case you would be too old-fashioned to react properly toward an...unusual...client. As it happened, you showed no sign of xenophobia whatsoever."

"I used to read a lot of science fiction, before it became too soft-centered," Hewlitt said dryly. Then he

turned to Scrennagle. "I shall require additional measurements, sir, since I shall be building something a little more ambitious than a blanket. And it will be necessary to draft patterns for the garments as I go along. Making up, fitting, and finishing will take time if the work is to be done properly. I shall therefore board up the broken pane and attach a notice saying that I am closed for alterations...." He looked along Scrennagle's extraterrestrial body contours and thought, *There will probably be a lot of alterations.* "And I shall, of course, work on this order exclusively. But I cannot see it being completed in less than ten days."

"You have twelve days," said Fox, looking relieved. "I shall have the broken pane replaced as soon as possible. During our investigation your shop front was photographed, so we shall be able to reproduce the gold lettering. After all, the breakage was indirectly my fault."

"I venture to disagree," Scrennagle broke in. "As the prime cause of the trouble, I would be obliged, Mr. Hewlitt, if you would allow me to replace the glass from material in my ship as a memento of my visit. The material is transparent and proof against both meteorite collisions and minor emotional disturbances."

"You are very kind, sir," said Hewlitt, laughing, "I accept." He wrote on the measurement pad, *From center back to waist, 35 inches.*

It took nearly three hours to complete the job to his satisfaction, including a half-hour's discussion regarding the musculature and jointing of the limbs and torso and the provision needed to give comfort as well as style to the garments, particularly in the areas of the neck, chest, armpits, and crotch.

When Scrennagle and Fox left, Hewlitt locked the door and climbed the stairs past his first-floor stock-rooms to the flat above to break the news to his wife.

Mrs. Hewlitt had been a virtual cripple since a street accident eighteen years earlier. She could walk about the flat for three hours a day without too much discomfort, and these hours she saved for the evening meal and for talking to her husband afterwards. The rest of the time she spent rolling about the flat in her wheelchair, tidying, cooking, seeing if there was work for her to do, or sleeping, which she did not do very well even at night.

He told her about his extraterrestrial client, and of the necessity for keeping the matter a close secret for the time being. She studied his sketches and measurements with interest, working out the yardages of material and trimmings needed for the job. Hewlitt should be ashamed of himself, she said, for trying to make her believe such a tall story. She reminded him that in her youth she once had to make a costume for a stage horse. The reason for the number of costumes required, particularly the sets of underwear, was unclear, she said; but no doubt they were being used in a sophisticated pantomime or farce in which the stage horse was expected to partially disrobe. The detail required in the fly fastenings, she added disapprovingly, probably meant that it was a very sophisticated and *naughty* show.

"Not at all, dear," said Hewlitt with a perfectly straight face. "It will be more in the nature of a spectacular, and you'll be able to see the highlights, and our costumes, on TV"

Hewlitt, who had always held moral cowardice to be the better part of valor, noted her pleased and excited expression and said nothing more.

During the three days and for most of the intervening nights before Scrennagle was due for his first fitting, the pleasure and the sense of excitement remained with Mrs. Hewlitt, even though on one occasion she said that there had been a time when they would have refused such a gimmicky commission. Hewlitt replied by saying that the work required the highest standards of tailoring and finish, regardless of its ultimate destination, and that the work was the most professionally challenging as well as the most remunerative he had ever been given. But secretly he was becoming prey to self-doubts.

His problem was to design, cut, and build a suit which would not make a horse look like a man but like a very well-dressed and dignified horse. The whole idea was ridiculous, yet Scrennagle was much too important a personage to be left open to the slightest suggestion of ridicule.

As Hewlitt had expected, the first fitting was visually a disaster. The fore and hind trouser legs were unpressed, shapeless, and held together temporarily with tacking stitches, while the embryo morning coat looked even worse with just one sleeve attached and tacking cotton holding together the lapel canvas, fronts, and shoulder wadding. While he plied his needle, chalk, and pins, Hewlitt transmitted confidence and reassurance for all he was worth; but it was obvious that neither Scrennagle nor Fox was receiving.

The Foreign Office official looked desperately worried and unhappy, and the pattern of wrinkling and puckering on the ambassador's features was almost certainly the extraterrestrial equivalent of these emotions.

Hewlitt kept his own doubts to himself and did his best to retrieve something from the situation by producing the first two sets of underwear, both of which fitted perfectly. He explained that these were relatively simple garments made from material which stretched and clung. He ignored the hints dropped by both Scrennagle and Fox that it might, after all, be better to settle for the horse blanket over underwear idea, and he requested a second fitting in four days' time.

Scrennagle's jacket was a large and structurally complex garment which covered not only the forward torso but the body back to the hindquarters. It was cut away sharply at the front, after which the skirt maintained a level line two inches below the point where the legs joined the body. But the jacket, because of the length and area of material used, made the trouser-clad legs look disproportionately thin.

Hewlitt apparently had been able to reduce the area of the jacket by introducing a set of false pleats running along the spine and dividing at the tail opening; and he had used a series of strategically placed darts to shape the garment at awkward body contours. But he had had to scrap and recut the original trousers, making them nearly twice as wide but with a neat taper to approximately double the hoof diameter at the bottoms. This meant redesigning the method of suspension across the back and modifying the crotch, but the over-all effect looked much better balanced.

During the second fitting Hewlitt was pleased to find that he had been able to cure a troublesome tendency to crease where the foreleg muscles periodically distorted the waistcoat while Scrennagle was walking. But the garments, to Scrennagle's and Fox's untutored eyes, still looked like the proverbial pound of tripe. It was obvious that they were both coming to a decision—almost certainly the wrong one—and Hewlitt tried desperately to head them off.

"We are extremely lucky," he said, smiling, "in that a size 16 neckband shirt is a perfect fit on you, sir, as is a size 8 hat. The hat will be carried rather than worn for the most part, likewise the gloves, which don't quite fit—"

"Don't you think," said Fox suddenly, "that you may be trying for the impossible, Mr. Hewlitt?"

More quietly, Scrennagle joined in. "This is by no means a criticism of your professional ability, and you may well produce the garments required; but wouldn't you agree that something in the nature of the blanket already discussed would serve as a useful standby? It would also relieve you of a heavy responsibility."

"I did not ask to be relieved of the responsibility," said Hewlitt. The responsibility was beginning to scare him sick. He really should take this easy way out—but he had too much confidence, or perhaps over-confidence, in his ability. He went on, "I have undertaken to clothe you suitably for the forthcoming social and formal occasions, sir, and you can trust me to fulfill my obligations.

"However," Hewlitt continued quickly, "I have a minor problem regarding foot coverings. The black woolen socks can be adapted and cut to fit, but Earth-type shoes would look out of place and would be difficult for you to wear with confidence. Would it be possible to use a non-toxic paint to color the osseous material of your hooves—glossy black for the formal occasion and brown for the walkabouts? They should also be padded, since hoof sounds might also be considered out of place." *It would make you sound too much like a horse*, Hewlitt said silently. Aloud: "And there is the matter of displaying the tail, sir. It is a long, luxuriant, and remarkably handsome tail—"

"Thank you," said Scrennagle.

—but it is constantly in motion and likely to be a distraction to people holding a conversation with you. Mr. Fox tells me that these movements are involuntary. However, as I see it, your tail is analogous to the cranial and/or facial hair in a Earth-person. Those who have such hair frequently display it to the best advantage on formal occasions. It can be pleated, braided, decorated in various fashions, and combed or oiled to give it a richer texture. If you have no objections, sir, we might plait your tail, adding, say, a few lengths of white or silver cord, then coil it neatly and secure it with a retaining strap which I can add to the center seam?"

"I have no objections, Mr. Hewlitt," said Scrennagle. "We do something similar on Dutha."

"These are details, Hewlitt," said Fox. "Important details, I admit, which will apply to whatever type of garment is worn. But "

"There is also the matter of decorations, sir," Hewlitt continued. "These are colored ribbons and pieces of engraved metal which indicate that the person wearing them has achieved some great feat, or that an ancestor has done so. The evening reception will include many people wearing dress uniforms and full evening wear to which are added the kind of decorations I have been describing. I would like you to wear some kind of decoration or award," he went on seriously, "but preferably one that has not simply been invented for the occasion. Can you suggest something which might be suitable, sir?"

Scrennagle was silent for a moment, then he said, "My race has no equivalent of these awards, except possibly the translator which is necessary to the performance of my work. There is a somewhat larger version, decorated with the Federation symbol, which is worn when more than one translation has to be handled at the same time. But these, also, are merely the tools of our profession."

"But it is not a common profession, surely?"

"It is not," said Scrennagle. The expression which twisted the alien features might have been one of pride.

"Would you have any objections to displaying this device on a colored ribbon?"

"No objections."

"Thank you, sir," Hewlitt said. He went on briskly, "The morning wear will be ready for collection before breakfast time on the day required, and the evening wear in the afternoon of the same day. Your walking-out suits and accessories, which will not be required until your list of formal visits is complete, will be much easier to make as a result of experience gained with the first garments—"

"Which will be," said Fox very firmly, "a well-cut and tastefully decorated blanket."

Hewlitt pretended to ignore him as he said, "You may trust me, sir."

"I am trusting you, Mr. Hewlitt, more than any other person on this planet...."

Long after they had gone, Hewlitt thought about Scrennagle's parting remark. While his wife and he worked on the recutting and finishing of the first outfit, he worried. Was he being a stupid, self-opinionated, sartorial snob or did he really have the right to dictate to Scrennagle as he had been doing?

The ambassador was an extremely important being who was, in the way of all representatives of other governments, anxious to make a good impression. But he would also be receiving impressions, favorable or otherwise, from the people he was meeting. Being realistic about it, the latter impressions were the more important as far as the human race was concerned. In all probability Scrennagle was important enough to make the decision whether his world and the rest of the Federation maintained contact with Earth or left it strictly alone.

And this was the being that he, a conceited and impoverished little tailor, was going to dress for the most important occasion in human history. He was, of course, going to dress him to the best of his ability; but the media were fond of poking fun at VIPs. Given half a chance, they would tear Scrennagle apart; and the ambassador would go away and neither he nor his friends would ever return to the place where the people lacked manners and where the Federation representative had been made to look a fool.

Many times while he was reopening a seam to remove an unsightly fullness or while giving the pockets the swelled edges that were his own particular signature on a suit, he thought about putting aside the work for the few hours necessary for him to make a blanket. He thought about it long and seriously, but he kept working on the job in hand while he was making up his mind. When he and his wife went to bed in the early hours of the following morning and arose to resume work a short time later, he still had not made up his mind.

Producing a glorified horse blanket would be insurance against the dress wear turning out to be a sartorial disaster. But if he made the blanket he would simply be obeying orders and shifting the responsibility back to Fox. He would also be allowing a man who knew less than he did to tell him what to do.

Then suddenly the morning coat and trousers were finished, pressed, and hanging with their accessories on the form which Hewlitt had adapted from the limbs and torsos of one and a half window-display models; and there was no longer enough time to make a blanket because it was the morning of The Day and Scrennagle was due at any moment.

The ambassador said little while Hewlitt was showing him how to fasten the shirt, knot the tie, and fit, among other items, the footless dark socks over his black-painted hooves. While fitting the trousers, waistcoat, and jacket the tailor talked about the desirability of moving slowly—sudden movements lacked dignity and looked bad on TV. He was aware that he was talking too much and that he was making himself sound ridiculous by punctuating every few words with a yawn.

Perhaps Scrennagle would not realize how nervous and unsure of himself Hewlitt felt because the over-all ensemble did not look exactly as he had envisaged it—and in his present physical and mental state of fatigue he did not know what it looked like.

During the proceedings Fox maintained the tightest-lipped silence he had ever experienced; but he tossed Hewlitt a copy of the morning paper and nodded worriedly as they left.

The news about Scrennagle was published as a Court Circular:

His Excellency the Lord Scrennagle of Dutha will be received in audience by the Queen this morning, and will present his Letters of Credence as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary from the Galactic Federation to the Court of St. James. A State Reception will be held in his honor at the Palace, during which sound and vision broadcast facilities will be available.

Hewlitt moved the TV into his workroom so that he could watch without disturbing his wife, who was still asleep, while he worked on the evening suit. But the TV coverage was unsatisfactory. Apparently the Court Circular had been treated by the press as some kind of hoax. A tourist had been able to film Scrennagle's arrival at St. James's, and he would probably receive a fortune for a few feet of badly focused film which did not give any indication of how well or otherwise the ambassador's suit fitted him.

Hewlitt waited for a couple of hours, then switched on his transistor radio to hear an excited voice saying that news had just been received from the Palace to the effect that Dutha was an inhabited planet circling a sun some two thousand light-years from Earth and that the Duthan, Scrennagle, was being accorded the honors of a visiting head of state as well as those of an ambassador. Whether the whole thing was a hoax or not, the voice went on, tonight's reception would be covered to the same extent as the early moon landings.

His wife heard the same news item. She looked dreadfully tired but happier than he had seen her for a great many years. But she was not talking to him for the time being because he had told her the truth and had deliberately made it sound like a lie.

Hewlitt's mind and fingers were so stiff and tired that he was almost an hour late in completing the suit. But that did not matter: Scrennagle did not call for it. Just two hours before the reception was due to begin, a uniformed inspector arrived to say that there had been unforeseen delays and that he would collect the outfit and take it to Scrennagle's ship. A few minutes later, a more senior police officer arrived to say that since there was no longer any need for secrecy they were removing the screens from his shop front and that a couple of glaziers had also arrived to replace his door window.

"Can't it wait until morning?" Hewlitt asked, clenching his teeth to fight back a yawn.

"You look very tired, sir," the policeman said. "I would be happy to stay here until they've finished, and lock the door as I leave. I'll put your key in the letter-box."

"That is very considerate of you," said Hewlitt warmly. "I do need rest. Thank you."

"My pleasure, sir," said the officer, so respectfully that he seemed to be ready to salute.

The warm feeling left by the unusually friendly policeman faded as Hewlitt mounted the stairs. He thought about the probable reasons why Scrennagle had sent for his suit rather than collect it himself. The outfit he had worn this morning had probably been a mess, and this evening he would be wearing a horse blanket tailored on short notice by someone else. Being a diplomat and a considerate being as well, Scrennagle would not want to complain in person to Hewlitt, or to pass on the criticisms which had doubtless been made about his appearance. He would simply take delivery of the second outfit and say nothing.

But Hewlitt's misery was short-lived. As he slumped into his chair before the TV screen, a panel of experts were discussing the implications of contact with an extra-solar race, and pundits always put him to sleep.

The first few bars of the fanfare which opened the late-night newscast, especially extended to cover the visit of the extraterrestrial, jerked Hewlitt awake. Quickly he wheeled his wife in from the kitchen, then settled back to see how Scrennagle had comported himself.

Unlike the amateur film taken at St. James's, Scrennagle's arrival for the reception was covered in close-up, middle distance, and from every angle. The ambassador was not wearing a horse blanket.

His jacket was a good fit at the collar and shoulders, but showed a tendency to wrinkle across the back when Scrennagle straightened after making a bow—something he had to do every few minutes. The trousers hung well, making the legs look neither too blocky nor too thin, and the black socks and dully polished hooves were elegantly inconspicuous. The tail was coiled and tied forward like that of some heraldic beast, and its occasional twitchings were barely noticeable.

The only touch of color was the wide silk ribbon that diagonally bisected the white shirt front and waistcoat. It was pale blue with a thin edging of red and gold on which was centered the intricately decorated translation device which bore the symbol of the Federation. Although not the most impressive decoration there, it still managed to hold its own among all the Baths and Garters.

Scrennagle of Dutha, Hewlitt realized suddenly, looked well. . .

Then the Duthan was making his speech, outlining briefly the purpose of his visit and touching on some of the advantages which membership in the Galactic Federation would confer in both directions.

It had been just over one hundred and fifty years earlier that one of the Federation's unmanned searchships found intelligent life and a rapidly developing technology on Earth. The long delay in responding to the situation, Scrennagle explained, was due to the fact that the searchships—which rarely found anything—were not fitted with power-hungry, ultimate drive because machinery, unlike Duthans, Earth-humans, and members of other intelligent species, did not age or become bored. The searchship had spent many years in orbit photographing, analyzing, evaluating specimens of flora and fauna, the written and spoken languages—the last being particularly difficult for its soft-landed probes to obtain because radio and television had not then been invented.

When the data had been returned to Dutha for study, several difficult decisions had had to be taken. There was, of course, no question that contact should not be attempted with the rich and varied cultures on Earth. But at the time the material had been gathered, many sociopolitical groupings were showing signs of imminent collapse while others were rapidly growing in power and influence.

At that time the British Empire, with its center of power and commerce in London, was the most important and influential grouping, but it, too, was showing signs of collapse. It had grown slowly, however, and its traditions and laws were deeply rooted. The indications were that it would collapse not catastrophically, but wane slowly and disintegrate in a stable fashion. It was also thought that the manners and practices observed a century and a half earlier would not significantly alter in such a long-lived grouping...

"That is why I landed quietly in this country rather than in one of the others," Scrennagle continued. "I now know that the decision was the correct one. But we, too, have certain rules of behavior in these circumstances. You might think that for a highly advanced Galactic culture we are surprisingly old-fashioned. But an acceptable code of behavior plays a vital part in dealings between species so widely varied as the members of our Federation.

"One of our strictest rules," he added, wrinkling his facial openings in what was undoubtedly a smile, "is that visitors such as myself conform to all of the social practices and customs of the host planet; even to the extent of wearing its clothing...."

He concluded by saying that his intention was to make a round of official visits to heads of state on Earth. Then, later, he would return to take a leisurely, sightseeing tour of the planet which would enable him to meet people in more relaxed conditions. He added that Earth had been the first new world to be offered membership in something over four centuries, and he would be happy to answer questions on every subject under this or any other sun.

The next item was the TV interview, during which, at long last, the subject of Scrennagle's clothing came up.

"...we will need much more time to consider the wider aspects of your visit," the interviewer was saying, "but right now, Your Excellency, I would like to ask a question, and also compliment you, on your clothing. Or perhaps I should compliment your extraterrestrial tailor?"

"You should compliment my terrestrial tailor," Scrennagle said, then went on: "On many worlds clothing is simply a means of giving protection from extremes of weather, while on others the fabrication, styling, and wearing of clothing has been raised to the level of a major art form. Earth is in the latter category and possesses at least one tailor who is capable of making an extraterrestrial...presentable."

The interviewer laughed and asked, "Who is he, Your Excellency?"

"I would rather not say at present," Scrennagle replied. "He and his wife have worked long and hard, and they deserve at least one night's sleep before fame descends on them. Suffice it to say that my tailor is relatively unknown but a craftsman of the highest order. He is also something of a tyrant in sartorial matters, a characteristic common to tailors throughout the Galaxy. He is not afraid to accept a professional challenge, as you can see."

"Yes, indeed," said the interviewer.

"No doubt there will be other challenges," Scrennagle went on, turning his face directly into camera, but Hewlitt knew that he was not speaking solely to the interviewer. "My race was chosen to make first contact with Earth-humans simply because my people most closely resembled yours—despite what you must think are major physiological differences. Other races in the Federation have much more varied and interestingly arranged limbs and appendages; and to the uninitiated they may even appear to be quite horrendous. But ambassadors from all these species in time will visit Earth to present their credentials and their good wishes. And they will all require to be suitably attired for the occasion. They will be very pleased and reassured to know," he ended, "that there is an Earth-human tailor in whom they can place their complete trust.."

The intense feelings of pride and excitement which should have kept him awake that night, but did not, were with him in undiminished intensity when he opened the shop next morning. His reflection in the store window opposite looked the same as always, but something different about the reflected picture made him turn around quickly.

The new door pane was not quite the same as the old one. It now read **GEORGE L. HEWLITT, TAILOR**, centered above a beautifully executed copy of the design which appeared on Scrennagle's translator—the symbol which represented all the worlds of the Galactic Federation—followed by the words **BY APPOINTMENT**.