



Neat and tidy and all buttoned up

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Deck head

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Someone recently suggested to me on separate occasions that, one, I should practice what I preach, and, two, that I should become a butler. We teach what we most need to learn, so the first admonishment came as no surprise. I admit, however, to balking at the second suggestion although, after longer consideration, I did explore it.

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I came across a fine institution in Toronto aptly named The Butler School. Charles MacPherson offers a comprehensive eight-week course on everything required to be a first-class household staff member.

Were I not approaching 60, I would give enrolling more serious consideration. I have been in contact with staff at the school, though, and will undoubtedly learn a great deal from them.

I awakened suddenly early one morning, thinking of buttons. I thought The Butler School would cover the subject but, alas, time does not allow it to be included in the curriculum, so I offer here a few ins and outs of the button based on my own observations.

Have you ever noticed how the spare buttons that come with new clothes seem to have vanished when you need them? Perhaps you threw them away when you removed the tags. Perhaps they snagged on something along the way, in the washing machine, say, or on a trail in the woods. Invariably, buttons do get lost - maybe the garment has shrunk, maybe the stitching was weak, maybe the chemicals in laundry detergent weakened the thread - and need to be replaced.

To be honest, I do not have a tidy button jar with needles and assorted colored threads that I keep in a logical place. Miraculously, though, a suitable button and serviceable needle and thread always seem to appear when needed.

I remember as a child that my mother and grandmother had sewing baskets teeming with hundreds of buttons and other sewing paraphernalia.

I hope buttons will be there when you need them.

When I told a friend about this column, she posed the question of buttoning buttons - or not. Although originally used for fastening, buttons are also decorative accents, of course.

Take, for example, the three-piece business suit. There could be a lot of buttons to consider, depending on the tailoring. As a fashion rule, though, the bottom button on both the vest and the jacket should be left undone. The same is true of a two-button suit.

A fastened bottom button is an unflattering look on most anyone. At the dinner table, by the way, it is perfectly acceptable and far more comfortable to undo your jacket buttons - all of them. You will not only enjoy your meal more, but your jacket will hang straighter.

Buttons on shirt sleeves are curious, as well. I have recently discovered a new style, at least to me, in which the buttons are placed side by side, not one on top of the other. This is undoubtedly to accommodate different wrist sizes. For me, this presents a problem, because my wrists are different sizes, leaving me with the obvious dilemma of which button to use. Surely I would want to use the same button on each sleeve for uniformity, which means one sleeve will be too tight, or one too loose. I suppose I should be happy to be faced with such an un-serious dilemma in the first place and just carry on.

Have you ever lost - OK, popped - a button at an inconvenient time, such as while dining out? I have. That scenario is usually accompanied with the question, "Have you a safety pin I might borrow?"

In these situations, my advice is to act as though nothing happened, and thus not draw attention to the mishap.

Safety pin or not, this will test your true coping mettle. This may be a good time to excuse yourself and remedy the problem in private. Consulting the wait staff or kitchen personnel might be a good place to start.

Resourcefulness rules!

You will never have been so thankful for a safety pin in your life.

There you have it. Reflections on the button. Its rightful place on a garment, how it is done and undone, and the idea that a safety pin may be your greatest ally in the world beyond the confines of your home.

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