



American Expression E1766 See a man about a horse

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The phrase "See a man about a horse" is an idiom that is often used in a humorous or evasive way. It is typically employed to deflect or avoid answering a direct question about one's whereabouts or activities. Instead of providing a straightforward response, someone might use this phrase as a lighthearted or cryptic way of indicating that they need to attend to a private or personal matter.

The origin of this idiom is a bit murky, but it likely dates back to the 19th century when it gained popularity in American and British English. The phrase itself doesn't have any literal meaning involving horses; rather, it serves as a convenient and amusing way to dodge inquiries.

When someone says, "I need to see a man about a horse," they are essentially saying, "I have a private or personal matter to attend to that I don't wish to disclose at the moment." It's a polite way of excusing oneself from a conversation or situation without going into specific details.

The humor in this phrase lies in its absurdity and the fact that it raises more questions than it answers. It leaves the listener curious about what exactly the person needs to do with a horse or a mysterious "man" associated with it.

Over time, "See a man about a horse" has become a playful and somewhat outdated expression. It's often used in a tongue-in-cheek manner, and its charm lies in its quaintness. People might use it when they want to inject a bit of humor or whimsy into a conversation, especially if they'd rather not disclose their true intentions or whereabouts.

For example, if someone at a party is asked, "Where are you going?" and they respond with, "I have to see a man about a horse," it adds an element of intrigue and amusement to the interaction. It's a way of gracefully exiting a conversation without revealing too much.

In literature and popular culture, this phrase has made occasional appearances, contributing to the humorous or enigmatic tone of a scene. It's often used when characters want to create a diversion or avoid divulging sensitive information.

In summary, "See a man about a horse" is a whimsical and evasive idiom used to deflect questions about one's whereabouts or activities. Its origins are somewhat obscure, but it has endured as a charming and amusing way to add a touch of humor and mystery to a conversation. While it doesn't involve actual horses or men, it remains a delightful part of the English language's colorful collection of idiomatic expressions.

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever encountered the idiom "See a man about a horse" in conversation or literature? How did the context of its usage make you feel, and what was your reaction to the phrase?
2. When do you think it's appropriate to use playful or cryptic expressions like this one in conversation? Are there specific situations where using such idioms adds humor or intrigue?
3. In what ways do idiomatic expressions like "See a man about a horse" reflect the cultural and linguistic richness of a language? Can you think of other idioms that serve similar purposes of humor or evasion?
4. Have you ever used this phrase or a similar idiom to politely excuse yourself from a conversation or situation? How did others react, and did it achieve the intended effect of adding humor or mystery?
5. Idioms often evolve over time and may become less common or even obsolete. Do you think expressions like "See a man about a horse" still have a place in contemporary language, or are they mostly relics of the past?