



American Expression E2679 Part brass rags

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The expression “part brass rags” is an old idiom that means to quarrel, argue, or end a close relationship after a disagreement. When people “part brass rags,” they usually separate on bad terms after a dispute. The phrase is most often used to describe the breakdown of friendships, partnerships, or working relationships where two people who were once close become divided because of conflict.

The origin of the phrase is commonly linked to British naval slang from the nineteenth century. Sailors often shared small living spaces on ships, and their personal belongings were stored in cloth bags or containers sometimes referred to as “rags.” These bags could include brass items such as buttons, buckles, or personal metal objects. When sailors argued or ended a friendship, they might divide their shared belongings, including these “brass rags,” symbolizing the separation of their relationship.

Because sailors lived in very close quarters, disagreements could easily arise, and the act of separating belongings became a visible sign that the relationship had broken down. Over time, the phrase “to part brass rags” developed as a colorful way to describe a falling-out between individuals. Although the literal practice faded with time, the expression remained as a figurative description of quarrels or broken friendships.

In everyday language, the idiom may appear in discussions about disagreements between friends, family members, or colleagues. For example, two business partners who end their cooperation after an argument might be said to have “parted brass rags.” The phrase emphasizes the seriousness of the disagreement, suggesting that the relationship has been damaged enough to cause separation.

The idiom also reflects the idea that conflicts can escalate when people are in close relationships or environments. Just as sailors spent long periods together on ships, people who work or live closely together may experience tensions that eventually lead to arguments. The phrase captures the emotional moment when cooperation breaks down and individuals decide to go their separate ways.

Although the expression is somewhat old-fashioned today, it still appears in literature, historical discussions, and some informal British speech. Writers sometimes use it to create a vivid image of a disagreement that ends a partnership. Because it carries historical color and storytelling value, the phrase can add character to descriptions of conflicts.

In conclusion, “part brass rags” is an idiom that means to quarrel or separate after a disagreement, particularly when a close relationship comes to an end. Originating from British naval slang, the phrase reflects the symbolic act of dividing personal belongings after a dispute. Even though its literal background belongs to the past, the expression continues to illustrate how conflicts can lead people to break ties and go their separate ways.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the idiom “part brass rags” mean, and in what situations might it be used?
2. How did life on naval ships contribute to the origin of the expression “part brass rags”?
3. Why do disagreements sometimes lead people to end friendships or partnerships completely?
4. Can you think of examples in modern life where two people might “part brass rags”?
5. What lessons can people learn about communication and conflict from situations where relationships end after arguments?