Etymology of popular idioms

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1. Bite the bullet

Meaning: *To accept something difficult or unpleasant*

Origin: In the older days, when doctors were short on anesthesia or time during a battle, they would ask the patient to bite down on a bullet to distract from the pain. The first recorded use of the phrase was in 1891 in The Light that Failed by Rudyard Kipling.

Example: I do not like going to the dentist, but I have to bite the bullet and make an appointment.

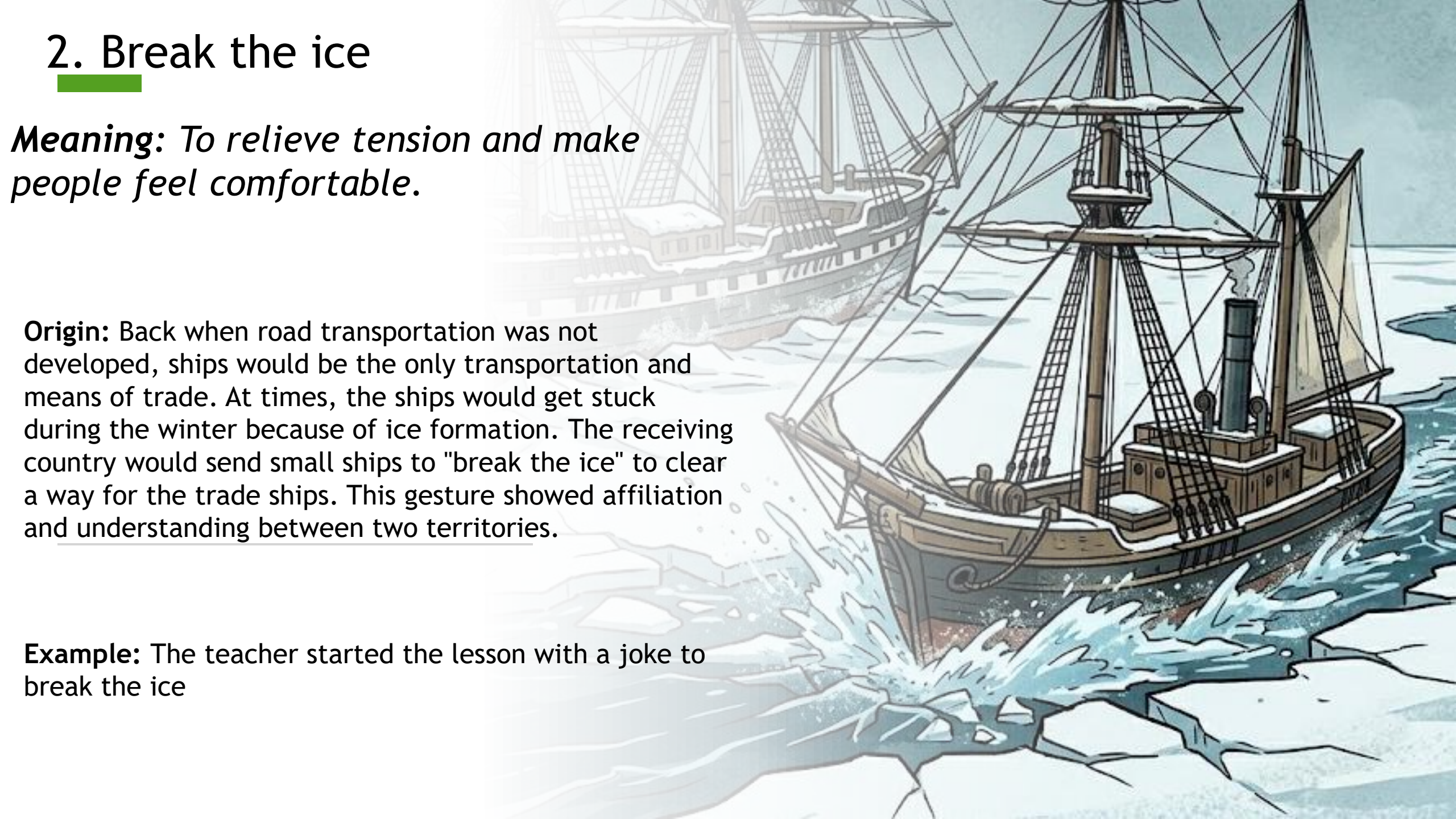


2. Break the ice

Meaning: *To relieve tension and make people feel comfortable.*

Origin: Back when road transportation was not developed, ships would be the only transportation and means of trade. At times, the ships would get stuck during the winter because of ice formation. The receiving country would send small ships to "break the ice" to clear a way for the trade ships. This gesture showed affiliation and understanding between two territories.

Example: The teacher started the lesson with a joke to break the ice



3. Butter someone up

Meaning: *To impress someone with flattery*

Origin: This was a customary religious act in ancient India, People would throw butter balls at the statues of their gods to seek favor and forgiveness.

Example: He had to butter his boss up to get a promotion.

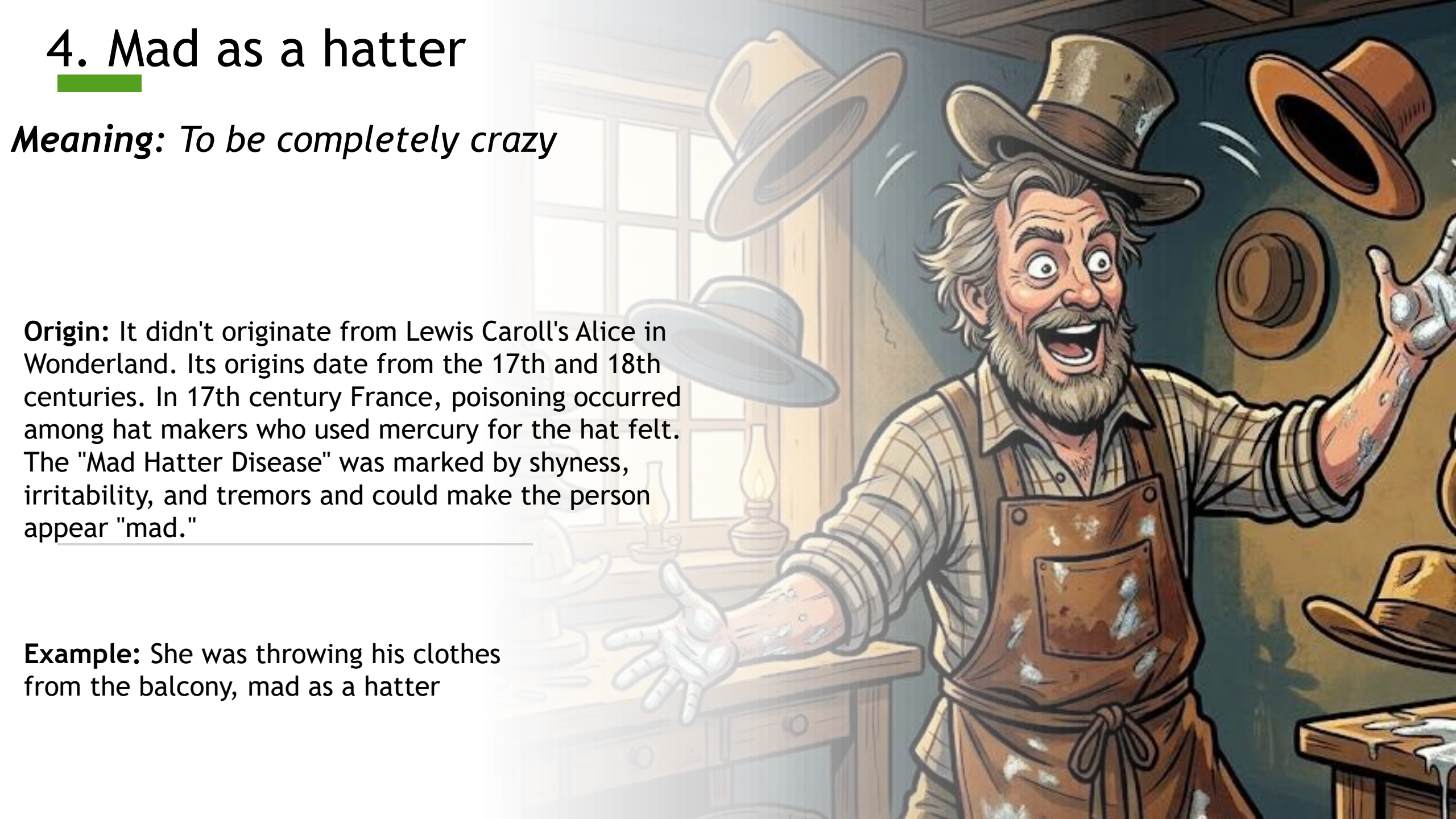


4. Mad as a hatter

Meaning: *To be completely crazy*

Origin: It didn't originate from Lewis Caroll's Alice in Wonderland. Its origins date from the 17th and 18th centuries. In 17th century France, poisoning occurred among hat makers who used mercury for the hat felt. The "Mad Hatter Disease" was marked by shyness, irritability, and tremors and could make the person appear "mad."

Example: She was throwing his clothes from the balcony, mad as a hatter



5. Cat got your tongue?

Meaning: *Asked to a person who is at loss of words*

Origin: A possible source could be from ancient Egypt, where liars' and blasphemers' tongues were cut out and fed to the cats.

Example: Say something, cat got your tongue?



6. Turn a blind eye

Meaning: *To ignore situations, facts, or reality*

Origin: The British Naval hero, Admiral Horatio Nelson, had one blind eye. Once when the British forces signaled for him to stop attacking a fleet of Danish ships, he held up a telescope to his blind eye and said, "I do not see the signal." He attacked, nevertheless, and was victorious.

Example: He turned a blind eye to her cries for help.



7. Give a cold shoulder

Meaning: *Being unwelcoming or antisocial toward someone*

Origin: The first recorded use of this phrase dates back to the early 1800s. It refers to a custom of giving an unwelcome guest a cold piece of meat from the shoulder of mutton, pork, or beef chop, as opposed to a welcome guest receiving a warm serving. This was a polite way to communicate, "You may leave, now."

Example: Did the cold shoulder from the musical critics bothered the opera Primadonna?

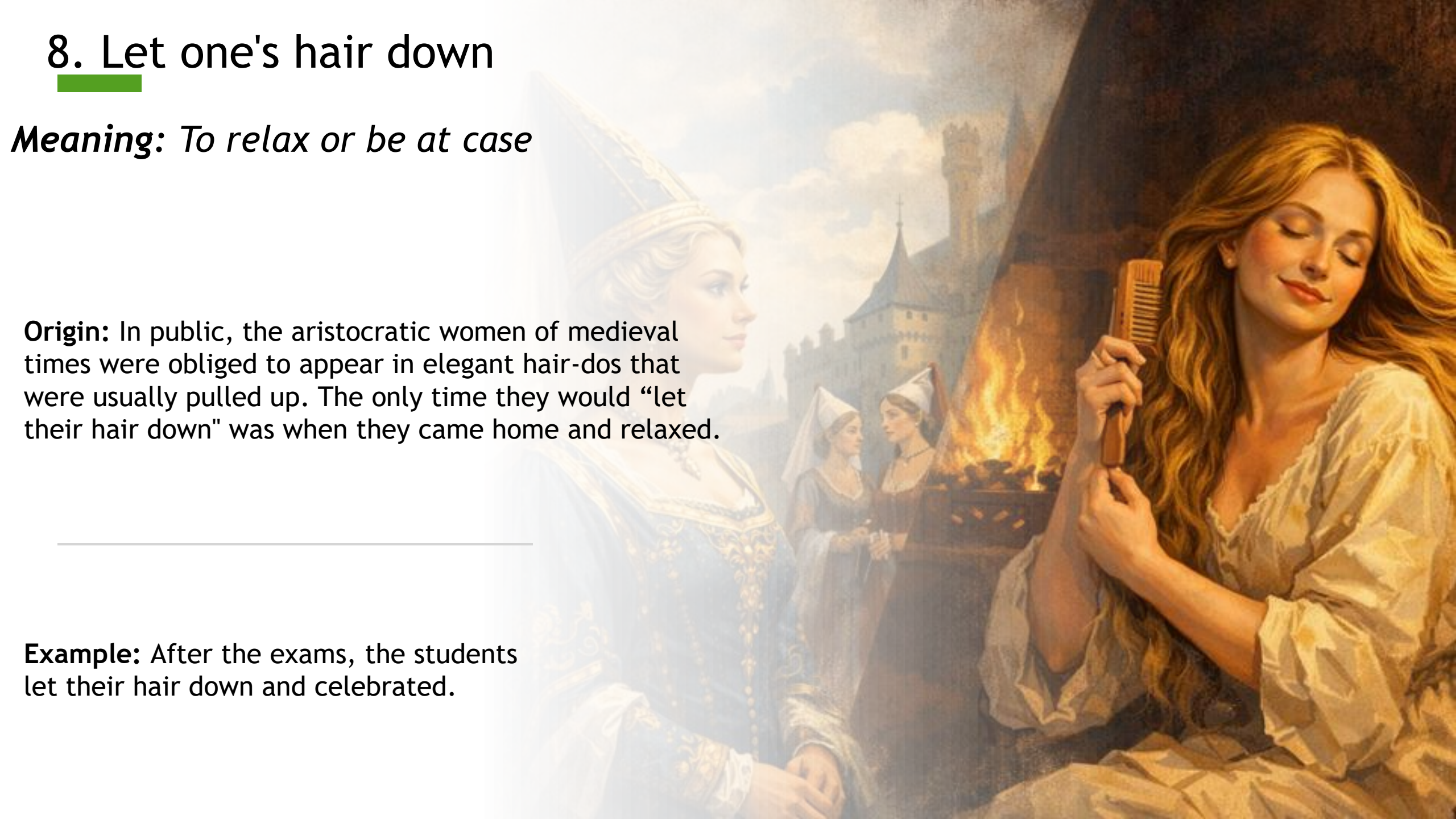


8. Let one's hair down

Meaning: *To relax or be at case*

Origin: In public, the aristocratic women of medieval times were obliged to appear in elegant hair-dos that were usually pulled up. The only time they would “let their hair down" was when they came home and relaxed.

Example: After the exams, the students let their hair down and celebrated.



9. Pull someone’s leg

Meaning: *To trick someone playfully.*

Origin: This phrase stems from a method used by street thieves in 18th and 19th century London. Often working in pairs, one thief was tasked with tripping up an unsuspecting victim using a cane, rope or piece of wire. The other thief robs the victim as he lay on the ground. Pulling your leg originally referred to the way the "tripper up" tried to make someone stumble.

Example: "I won the lottery!“
"Oh, stop pulling my leg!"



10. Spill the beans

Meaning: *To leak or tell some secret information.*

Origin: The history behind is most likely derived from an ancient Greek voting process involving beans. People would vote by placing one of two colored beans- white and black- in a vase, and if someone spilled the beans, the secret results of the election would be revealed beforehand.

Example: I was planning a surprise party for your mom’s birthday, but my sister spilled the beans.



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