

Secret of Casket : A Chinese Story

On her 75th birthday, Ah-ling distributed her wealth among her four sons and announced that she would spend three months of the year with each son, in turn.

The arrangement worked well for a while and then the old woman found that the welcome she received at each son's house was becoming less and less cordial. Finally she began to feel positively unwanted. Now she saw her sons in their true colors. Money meant everything to them, people came second.

One day, Ah-ling's friend, Jing-mei, came to see her. Jing-mei was distressed to find her friend in such an unhappy state and advised her on what she should do. Afterwards, Jing-mei tearfully embraced her friend, and left.

A few days later, towards sundown, Ah-ling went out without telling anyone where she was going and returned an hour later, her clothes covered in mud.



"Where did you go?" asked her son, and then seeing that she was holding a small ornamental chest, hurried to her, his gaze riveted on the casket.

"What is that?"

"Something that could change all our lives for the better, in different ways," said his mother.

"What does it contain?"

"You'll find out when I'm dead and gone."

The young man lost no time in informing his brothers about the casket. All wanted to know the secret of casket.

"It is obvious she has not given us all her wealth," said the eldest. "She must have kept back some of her more valuable gems. God alone knows how many caskets the wily woman has buried."

They questioned their mother but she refused to tell what the casket contained, or even if there were more caskets hidden elsewhere. Many a time, the brothers tried to open the casket in her absence but it was securely locked and they could never find the key.

But now Ah-ling no longer felt unwanted. Her sons and daughters-in-law fussed over her and went out of their way to make her feel welcome. In fact, now each son tried to persuade her to stay longer than the three months, but she never extended her stay, not wishing to show a preference for any son.

She passed away in her sleep, a few days before her 84th birthday. Her friend, Jing-mei, came for the funeral rites and before departing handed over a key to the dead woman's eldest son in the presence of his brothers.

"This is the key to the casket," she said and left.

All were eager to know the secret of casket.

The sons and their wives hurried to the old woman's chamber in great excitement. This was the day they had been waiting for, for weeks and months and years. They bolted the door from the inside and huddled around the casket. With trembling hands, the oldest brother fitted the key into the lock and turned it.

It opened with a click. The man flicked open the lid and then they all stared with disbelief at the contents: ordinary pebbles.

"The gems might be below," said the oldest brother and frantically overturned the contents. All they found was a note from their mother. It read:

"Great disappointment awaits all those whose lives centre around money. It is a sad thing when an old woman has to resort to trickery to get her sons to look after her. It shows lack of character not only in her sons but in the mother too. You at least have time to change yourselves and my last message to you is: try to do so". That was the secret of casket.

Adopted from: Chinese tale on English for Students