

Udea and Her Seven Brothers

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

African

Easy
20 min read

Once upon a time there was a man and his wife who had seven boys. The children lived in the open air and grew big and strong, and the six eldest spent part of every day hunting wild beasts. The youngest did not care so much about sport, and he often stayed with his mother.

One morning, however, as the whole seven were going out for a long expedition, they said to their aunt, 'Dear aunt, if a baby sister comes into the world to-day, wave a white handkerchief, and we will return immediately; but if it is only a boy, just brandish a sickle, and we will go on with what we are doing.'

Now the baby when it arrived really proved to be a girl, but as the aunt could not bear the boys, she thought it was a good opportunity to get rid of them. So she waved the sickle. And when the seven brothers saw the sign they said, 'Now we have nothing to go back for,' and plunged deeper into the desert.

The little girl soon grew to be a big girl, and she was called by all her friends (though she did not know it) 'Udea, who had driven her seven brothers into strange lands.'

One day, when she had been quarrelling with her playmates, the oldest among them said to her, 'It is a pity you were born, as ever since, your brothers have been obliged to roam about the world.'

Udea did not answer, but went home to her mother and asked her, 'Have I really got brothers?'

'Yes,' replied her mother, 'seven of them. But they went away the day you were born, and I have never heard of them since.'

Then the girl said, 'I will go and look for them till I find them.'

'My dear child,' answered her mother, 'it is fifteen years since they left, and no man has seen them. How will you know which way to go?'

'Oh, I will follow them, north and south, east and west, and though I may travel far, yet some day I will find them.'

Then her mother said no more, but gave her a camel and some food, and a negro and his wife to take care of her, and she fastened a cowrie shell round the camel's neck for a charm, and bade her daughter go in peace.

During the first day the party journeyed on without any adventures, but the second morning the negro said to the girl, 'Get down, and let the negress ride instead of you.'

'Mother,' cried Udea.

'What is it?' asked her mother.

'Barka wants me to dismount from my camel.'

'Leave her alone, Barka,' commanded the mother, and Barka did not dare to persist.

But on the following day he said again to Udea, 'Get down, and let the negress ride instead of you,' and though Udea called to her mother she was too far away, and the mother never heard her. Then the negro seized her roughly and threw her on the ground, and said to his wife, 'Climb up,' and the negress climbed up, while the girl walked by the side. She had meant to ride all the way on her camel as her feet were bare and the stones cut them till the blood came. But she had to walk on till night, when they halted, and the next morning it was the same thing again. Weary and bleeding the poor girl began to cry, and implored the negro to let her ride, if only for a little. But he took no notice, except to bid her walk a little faster.

By-and-by they passed a caravan, and the negro stopped and asked the leader if they had come across seven young men, who were thought to be hunting somewhere about. And the man answered, 'Go straight on, and by midday you will reach the castle where they live.'

When he heard this, the black melted some pitch in the sun, and smeared the girl with it, till she looked as much a negro as he did. Next he bade his wife get down from the camel, and told Udea to mount, which she was thankful to do. So they arrived at her brothers' castle.

Leaving the camel kneeling at the entrance for Udea to dismount, the negro knocked loudly at the door, which was opened by the youngest brother, all the others being away hunting. He did not of course recognise Udea, but he knew the negro and his wife, and welcomed them gladly, adding, 'But who does the other negress belong to?'

'Oh, that is your sister!' said they.

'My sister! but she is coal black!'

'That may be, but she is your sister for all that.'

The young man asked no more questions, but took them into the castle, and he himself waited outside till his brothers came home.

As soon as they were alone, the negro whispered to Udea, 'If you dare to tell your brothers that I made you walk, or that I smeared you with pitch, I will kill you.'

'Oh, I will be sure to say nothing,' replied the girl, trembling, and at that moment the six elder brothers appeared in sight.

'I have some good news for you,' said the youngest, hastening to meet them; 'our sister is here!'

'Nonsense,' they answered. 'We have no sister; you know the child that was born was a boy.'

'But that was not true,' replied he, 'and here she is with the negro and his wife. Only—she too is black,' he added softly, but his brothers did not hear him, and pushed past joyfully.

'How are you, good old Barka?' they said to the negro; 'and how comes it that we never knew that we had a sister till now?' and they greeted Udea warmly, while she shed tears of relief and gladness.

The next morning they all agreed that they would not go out hunting. And the eldest brother took Udea on his knee, and she combed his hair and talked to him of their home till the tears ran down his cheeks and dropped on her bare arm. And where the tears fell a white mark was made. Then the brother took a cloth and rubbed the place, and he saw that she was not black at all.

'Tell me, who painted you over like this?' cried he.

'I am afraid to tell you,' sobbed the girl, 'the negro will kill me.'

'Afraid! and with seven brothers!'

'Well, I will tell you then,' she answered. 'The negro forced me to dismount from the camel and let his wife ride instead. And the stones cut my feet till they bled and I had to bind them. And after that, when we heard your castle was near by, he took pitch and smeared my body with it.'

Then the brother rushed in wrath from the room, and seizing his sword, cut off first the negro's head and then his wife's. He next brought in some warm water, and washed his sister all over, till her skin was white and shining again.

'Ah, now we see that you are our sister!' they all said. 'What fools the negro must have thought us, to believe for an instant that we could have a sister who was black!' And all that day and the next they remained in the castle.

But on the third morning they said to their sister: 'Dear sister, you must lock yourself into this castle, with only the cat for company. And be very careful never to eat anything which she does not eat too. You must be sure to give her a bit of everything. In seven days we shall be back again.'

'All right,' she answered, and locked herself into the castle with the cat.

On the eighth day the brothers came home. 'How are you?' they asked. 'You have not been anxious?'

'No, why should I be anxious? The gates were fast locked, and in the castle are seven doors, and the seventh is of iron. What is there to frighten me?'

'No one will try to hurt us,' said the brothers, 'for they fear us greatly. But for yourself, we implore you to do nothing without consulting the cat, who has grown up in the house, and take care never to neglect her advice.'

'All right,' replied Udea, 'and whatever I eat she shall have half.'

'Capital! and if ever you are in danger the cat will come and tell us—only elves and pigeons, which fly round your window, know where to find us.'

'This is the first I have heard of the pigeons,' said Udea. 'Why did you not speak of them before?'

'We always leave them food and water for seven days,' replied the brothers.

'Ah,' sighed the girl, 'if I had only known, I would have given them fresh food and fresh water; for after seven days anything becomes bad. Would it not be better if I fed them every day?'

'Much better,' said they, 'and we shall feel any kindnesses you do towards the cat or the pigeons exactly as if they were shown to ourselves.'

'Set your minds at ease,' answered the girl, 'I will treat them as if they were my brothers.'

That night the brothers slept in the castle, but after breakfast next morning they buckled on their weapons and

mounted their horses, and rode off to their hunting grounds, calling out to their sister, 'Mind you let nobody in till we come back.'

'Very well,' cried she, and kept the doors carefully locked for seven days and on the eighth the brothers returned as before. Then, after spending one evening with her, they departed as soon as they had done breakfast.

Directly they were out of sight Udea began to clean the house, and among the dust she found a bean which she ate.

'What are you eating?' asked the cat.

'Nothing,' said she.

'Open your mouth, and let me see.' The girl did as she was told, and then the cat said 'Why did you not give me half?'

'I forgot,' answered she, 'but there are plenty of beans about, you can have as many as you like.'

'No, that won't do. I want half of that particular bean.'

'But how can I give it you? I tell you I have eaten it. I can roast you a hundred others.'

'No, I want half of that one.'

'Oh! do as you like, only go away!' cried she.

So the cat ran straight to the kitchen fire, and spit on it and put it out, and when Udea came to cook the supper she had nothing to light it with. 'Why did you put the fire out?' asked she.

'Just to show you how nicely you would be able to cook the supper. Didn't you tell me to do what I liked?'

The girl left the kitchen and climbed up on the roof of the castle and looked out. Far, far away, so far that she could hardly see it, was the glow of a fire. 'I will go and fetch a burning coal from there and light my fire,' thought she, and opened the door of the castle. When she reached the place where the fire was kindled, a hideous man-eater was crouching over it.

'Peace be with you, grandfather,' said she.

'The same to you,' replied the man-eater. 'What brings you here, Udea?'

'I came to ask for a lump of burning coal, to light my fire with.'

'Do you want a big lump or a little lump?'

'Why, what difference does it make?' said she.

'If you have a big lump you must give me a strip of your skin from your ear to your thumb, and if you have a little lump, you must give me a strip from your ear to your little finger.'

Udea, who thought that one sounded as bad as the other, said she would take the big lump, and when the man-eater had cut the skin, she went home again. And as she hastened on a raven beheld the blood on the ground, and plastered it with earth, and stayed by her till she reached the castle. And as she entered the door he flew past, and she shrieked from fright, for up to that moment she had not seen him. In her terror she called after him. 'May you get the same start as you have given me!'

'Why should you wish me harm,' asked the raven pausing in his flight, 'when I have done you a service?'

'What service have you done me?' said she.

'Oh, you shall soon see,' replied the raven, and with his bill he scraped away all the earth he had smeared over the blood and then flew away.

In the night the man-eater got up, and followed the blood till he came to Udea's castle. He entered through the gate which she had left open, and went on till he reached the inside of the house. But here he was stopped by the seven doors, six of wood and one of iron, and all fast locked. And he called through them 'Oh Udea, what

did you see your grandfather doing?’

‘I saw him spread silk under him, and silk over him, and lay himself down in a four-post bed.’

When he heard that, the man-eater broke in one door, and laughed and went away.

And the second night he came back, and asked her again what she had seen her grandfather doing, and she answered him as before, and he broke in another door, and laughed and went away, and so each night till he reached the seventh door. Then the maiden wrote a letter to her brothers, and bound it round the neck of a pigeon, and said to it, ‘Oh, thou pigeon that served my father and my grandfather, carry this letter to my brothers, and come back at once.’ And the pigeon flew away.

It flew and it flew and it flew till it found the brothers. The eldest unfastened the letter from the pigeon’s neck, and read what his sister had written: ‘I am in a great strait, my brothers. If you do not rescue me to-night, to-morrow I shall be no longer living, for the man-eater has broken open six doors, and only the iron door is left. So haste, haste, post haste.’

‘Quick, quick! my brothers,’ cried he.

‘What is the matter?’ asked they.

‘If we cannot reach our sister to-night, to-morrow she will be the prey of the man-eater.’

And without more words they sprang on their horses, and rode like the wind.

The gate of the castle was thrown down, and they entered the court and called loudly to their sister. But the poor girl was so ill with fear and anxiety that she could not even speak. Then the brothers dismounted and passed through the six open doors, till they stood before the iron one, which was still shut. ‘Udea, open!’ they cried, ‘it is only your brothers!’ And she arose and unlocked the door, and throwing herself on the neck of the eldest burst into tears.

‘Tell us what has happened,’ he said, ‘and how the man-eater traced you here.’ ‘It is all the cat’s fault,’ replied Udea. ‘She put out my fire so that I could not cook. All about a bean! I ate one and forgot to give her any of it.’

‘But we told you so particularly,’ said the eldest brother, ‘never to eat anything without sharing it with the cat.’

‘Yes, but I tell you I forgot,’ answered Udea.

‘Does the man-eater come here every night?’ asked the brothers.

‘Every night,’ said Udea, ‘and he breaks one door in and then goes away.’

Then all the brothers cried together, ‘We will dig a great hole, and fill it with burning wood, and spread a covering over the top; and when the man-eater arrives we will push him into it.’ So they all set to work and prepared the great hole, and set fire to the wood, till it was reduced to a mass of glowing charcoal. And when the man-eater came, and called as usual, ‘Udea, what did you see your grandfather doing?’ she answered, ‘I saw him pull off the ass’ skin and devour the ass, and he fell in the fire, and the fire burned him up.’

Then the man-eater was filled with rage, and he flung himself upon the iron door and burst it in. On the other side stood Udea’s seven brothers, who said, ‘Come, rest yourself a little on this mat.’ And the man-eater sat down, and he fell right into the burning pit which was under the mat, and they heaped on more wood, till nothing was left of him, not even a bone. Only one of his finger-nails was blown away, and fell into an upper chamber where Udea was standing, and stuck under one of the nails of her own fingers. And she sank lifeless to the earth.

Meanwhile her brothers sat below waiting for her and wondering why she did not come. ‘What can have happened to her!’ exclaimed the eldest brother. ‘Perhaps she has fallen into the fire, too.’ So one of the others ran upstairs and found his sister stretched on the floor. ‘Udea! Udea!’ he cried, but she did not move or reply. Then he saw that she was dead, and rushed down to his brothers in the courtyard and called out, ‘Come quickly, our sister is dead!’ In a moment they were all beside her and knew that it was true, and they made a bier and laid her on it, and placed her across a camel, and said to the camel, ‘Take her to her mother, but be careful not to halt by the way, and let no man capture you, and see you kneel down before no man, save him who shall say “string” [Footnote: ‘Riemen.’] to you. But to him who says “string,” then kneel.’

So the camel started, and when it had accomplished half its journey it met three men, who ran after it in order to catch it; but they could not. Then they cried ‘Stop!’ but the camel only went the faster. The three men panted

behind till one said to the others, 'Wait a minute! The string of my sandal is broken!' The camel caught the word 'string' and knelt down at once, and the men came up and found a dead girl lying on a bier, with a ring on her finger. And as one of the young men took hold of her hand to pull off the ring, he knocked out the man-eater's finger-nail, which had stuck there, and the maiden sat up and said, 'Let him live who gave me life, and slay him who slew me!' And when the camel heard the maiden speak, it turned and carried her back to her brothers.

Now the brothers were still seated in the court bewailing their sister, and their eyes were dim with weeping so that they could hardly see. And when the camel stood before them they said, 'Perhaps it has brought back our sister!' and rose to give it a beating. But the camel knelt down and the girl dismounted, and they flung themselves on her neck and wept more than ever for gladness.

'Tell me,' said the eldest, as soon as he could speak, 'how it all came about, and what killed you.'

'I was waiting in the upper chamber,' said she, 'and a nail of the man-eater's stuck under my nail, and I fell dead upon the ground. That is all I know.'

'But who pulled out the nail?' asked he.

'A man took hold of my hand and tried to pull off my ring, and the nail jumped out and I was alive again. And when the camel heard me say "Let him live who gave me life, slay him who slew me!" it turned and brought me back to the castle. That is my story.'

She was silent and the eldest brother spoke. 'Will you listen to what I have to say, my brothers?'

And they replied, 'How should we not hear you? Are you not our father as well as our brother?'

'Then this is my advice. Let us take our sister back to our father and mother, that we may see them once more before they die.'

And the young men agreed, and they mounted their horses and placed their sister in a litter on the camel. So they set out.

At the end of five days' journey they reached the old home where their father and mother dwelt alone. And the

heart of their father rejoiced, and he said to them, 'Dear sons, why did you go away and leave your mother and me to weep for you night and day?'

'Dear father,' answered the son, 'let us rest a little now, and then I will tell you everything from the beginning.'

'All right,' replied the father, and waited patiently for three days.

And on the morning of the fourth day the eldest brother said, 'Dear father, would you like to hear our adventures?'

'Certainly I should!'

'Well, it was our aunt who was the cause of our leaving home, for we agreed that if the baby was a sister she should wave a white handkerchief, and if it was a brother, she should brandish a sickle, for then there would be nothing to come back for, and we might wander far away. Now our aunt could not bear us, and hated us to live in the same house with her, so she brandished the sickle, and we went away. That is all our story.'

And that is all this story.

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