

The Story of Mai and the Magical Blackbird



LONG ago in the Celtic land of Brittany, there lived a girl called Mai. Now Brittany is a very beautiful place to live. It's dotted with villages, farms and wonderful beaches, and it lies in the north-west corner of France. Like Wales, Brittany is a Celtic nation, and the two countries share a rich and ancient tradition with many similarities between their languages, their music, and their folk tales. The name Mai, which is a popular Breton name, is also a popular Welsh name. It comes from the Celtic name for the hawthorn tree, which you'll know from your local hedgerows – it has wonderful white blossom in the Spring, and in the olden days, the farmers revered it as having magical properties.

Now Mai's mother Rozenn was the daughter of a very rich man, and when he died he left a manor house, a farm and a mill, as well as many horses, cattle, pigs and sheep together with fine furniture and linen.

There was plenty for Rozenn and her three brothers to share between them, but the brothers were greedy and selfish and decided to keep all this wealth for themselves. Perrik, the eldest brother, kept the manor, the farm, and the cows. Bran, the second brother, took the mill, the horses and the pigs. The third brother, Ewen, had the oxen, the sheep and fertile farmland. So nothing was left for Rozenn and Mai but an old ruined cottage on the heath.

When Rozenn was moving her few pieces of furniture to the cottage, Bran pretended to feel sorry for her. "Here, have this old white cow of mine", he said. "Mai can look after her on the heath."

Now Bran had only given his sister the old white cow because she was so skinny and bony that she was no use to him. Still, every morning Mai took the cow out to the stony heath to graze.

One day Mai noticed a blackbird perched on the branch of a hawthorn tree nearby. The bird was chirping and shaking its head, looking at Mai as if he was trying to speak to her. Mai stepped closer to listen more carefully. She couldn't understand his song, but it was so beautiful that Mai couldn't take her eyes off him.

At last, as the little bird flew away, Mai realised with a shock that it was nearly dark and the stars were already twinkling in the sky.

In a panic she looked around for the old white cow, but couldn't see her. She ran across the heath, checking all the usual nooks and crannies but there was no sign of her anywhere. Eventually, she had no choice but to go home and confess what had happened. You can imagine how terrible Mai felt as she explained, through her tears: "It's completely my fault! How could I let it happen when she was all we had? ... I'm so sorry Mother!" Rozenn comforted her saying, "We must not lose heart, even if everything seems to be against us. Come on, my darling girl, come and help me fetch some wood for the fire and we'll make some supper."

That evening Mai had no appetite for supper, and during the night she tossed and turned in her bed, worrying about the future and wishing that the old white cow would come back home. Eventually, she couldn't bear it a moment longer: and with dawn just beginning to break she jumped up and ran out onto the heath, barefoot and in her nightdress.

As she picked her way among the stones she spotted on the hawthorn tree the blackbird she had seen the day before. Once again he seemed to be calling her, and as she got close she noticed what looked like a gold coin lying at the foot of the tree.

Nudging it with her toe, she saw that it wasn't a coin at all but some sort of golden herb. It was glowing in the light of the dawn, and felt wonderfully soft and warm against the sole of her foot. It was like nothing she had seen or felt before.

"Mai, listen to me, I want to do something for you" – the girl gasped as she realised that she could understand what the bird was saying.

"Who are you?" asked Mai, completely astonished!

"I am your friend," said the bird, "And if you follow me I will help you teach your wicked uncles a lesson and make sure you and your mother have all you could wish for."

And off he flew. Mai rushed after him. She followed him across the heath and through the woods until they came to the sand dunes just opposite the Seven Isles. There the bird perched upon a piece of bracken.

"Can you see anything below on the beach?" asked the blackbird.

"Yes," said Mai, "I see a pair of wooden shoes made of beechwood and a staff of holly-wood."

"Put on the wooden shoes, and take the staff," said the blackbird.

"I will," said Mai, running down to the beach.

"Now, walk across the sea till you reach the first island, then go around it until you find a rock hidden beneath a blanket of emerald seaweed. Gather the seaweed and make a halter. Then strike the rock with your holly staff. A cow will appear. Put the halter on her and bring her home to your mother. It will comfort her for having lost the old white cow."

Mai carried out all the bird's instructions. With the magic shoes she walked on the sea to the first island. She went round it till she came to the rock, and she made a halter out of the emerald seaweed. Then with her holly staff she struck the rock, and instantly it opened up. Just as the bird had said, a beautiful cow appeared.

The cow's coat glowed and she stood quietly as Mai put the halter on and led her over the water. Over the dunes, through the woods, and across the heath they went till they reached the cottage. And when Mai's mother saw the cow she was as happy as she had been sad. But she was even happier when she milked the cow, for the milk flowed like water from a spring.

Mai's mother filled all her pots and pans, then she filled her wooden bowls, then her crocks and then her churns, yet still the milk flowed on from beautiful Buoc'h Mor. This was the name that Mai had given her, and it means Sea Cow in Breton – or in Welsh Buwch Mor.

Soon everyone was talking about the miraculous cow. People came from far and near to see her, and the farmers were offering higher and higher prices to buy her.

Now Perrik, the oldest of the wicked uncles, came to see his sister, and he said "If you are a good sister to me you will let me have this one cow, and in exchange I will give you the twenty cows I had from our father."

"Buoc'h Mor is worth far more than twenty ordinary cows," answered Mai's mother, "she is worth all the cows that are grazing in the highlands and the lowlands. Thanks to her I shall be able to sell milk in all the market places from Dinan to Lorient."

"Very well," said Perrik, "give her to me, and I will give you not only all my cows, but also our father's farm with all the fields and ploughs belonging to it."

Mai's mother accepted Perrik's offer and they moved into the comfortable farmhouse. She gave Buoc'h Mor to her brother, and Perrik led the animal away.

Mai cried when she saw Buoc'h Mor disappearing down the lane, and when night fell she went to the farmyard to give the cows their hay. "Oh why did Buoc'h Mor have to go? I don't believe that Uncle Perrik will take good care of her!"

No sooner had she spoken than the sound of gentle lowing came from the farmyard:

"Have no concern little Mai, here I am."

Very much astonished, Mai turned quickly and there was Buoc'h Mor with her head over the door!

"Oh! I am so happy to see you" she cried, "but who brought you here?"

"I do not belong to your wicked Uncle Perrik," said Buoc'h Mor, "I cannot belong to anyone who thinks only of themselves and behaves badly towards others. I came back to be with you."

"That is wonderful – but what about the farm?" asked Mai in a panic, "my mother will have to give back everything - the farmhouse, the fields, and the cows."

"Oh no she won't," answered Buoc'h Mor, "for they were hers by right, and her brother Perrik took them from her unjustly when your grandfather died."

"But my uncle Perrik will be furious and he will come to look for you here," said Mai.

"Don't worry, just do as I tell you: first go and pick three verbena leaves from the herb garden behind the farmhouse."

Mai quickly returned with the three fragrant leaves.

"Now," said Buoc'h Mor "rub me with those leaves from my ears to my tail, and whisper softly three times, "Saint Cadoc, Saint Briec, Saint Malo"

Mai did as she was told and, as she whispered for the third time, Buoc'h Mor turned into a beautiful horse.

The little girl was wonder-struck.

"Now," said the horse, "your Uncle Perrik will not know me. My name is no longer Buoc'h Mor but Kazeg Mor." (for Kazeg is Breton for horse, which is very like the Welsh word for horse, Caseg.)

When Mai's mother heard what had happened she was delighted. The very next day she loaded up the new horse with corn to take to market. And you can

imagine her surprise when she saw that the more she piled onto Kazeg Mor's back, the longer her back grew. So that she alone could carry as many sacks as all the horses in the parish.

The news of this miraculous horse soon spread abroad. When Mai's Uncle Bran heard of it he came to the farm and asked his sister to sell him the horse. She refused at first but eventually, when he promised to give her in exchange the mill and all the horses that were once their father's, she relented, and allowed her brother to lead Kazeg Mor away.

The very next evening the horse was home again. And again Mai picked three verbena leaves and rubbed her from her ears to her tail. No sooner had she done so than the horse changed into a sheep. But instead of white wool she was covered with scarlet wool as long as hemp and as soft as flax. Kazeg Mor was now Denved Mor (for denved is Breton for sheep, or dafad in Welsh). Mai was astonished and called her mother to come and admire this latest miracle.

"Go and fetch the shepherd's shears," she said to Mai, "the poor thing is weighted down with such heavy fleece."

But when she tried to shear Denved Mor the wool grew again as fast as she cut it off. So that this sheep alone was worth all the flocks on the mountains.

Now Mai's third Uncle, Ewen, happened to be passing by and he saw what was happening. He at once offered to exchange his oxen and all his sheep for Denved Mor.

Mai's mother agreed. But as Uncle Ewen was leading the sheep along the coastal path towards his home, Denved Mor suddenly slipped out of her halter and over the cliffs into the waves. Uncle Ewen stood helpless and aghast as his magical beast became a smaller and smaller dot in the ocean, finally vanishing into a rock, half submerged next to the smallest of the Seven Isles.

This time Mai waited in vain for Denved Mor to come home. She neither came back that day nor the next day. After three days the girl made her way to the hawthorn bush on the heath to search for the blackbird. There he was, singing away as always.

"I was expecting you," said the bird. "My work is done. Your wicked uncles are punished as they deserved, and now you and your mother have all you need for

a full and happy life. I must fly away now, but I hope you will always remember me."

And with that the bird spread his wings and off he went. Mai and her mother always remembered him, and made a special memorial which they placed on the heath to mark the spot where the magical Blackbird had perched upon the hawthorn, singing his beautiful song and changing their lives for ever.



Glossary of Key Breton Words featured in the story

Breton	Welsh	English
Mai	Mai	May, Whitethorn, Hawthorn
Rozenn	Rhosyn	Rose
Bran	Brân	Raven
Cadoc	Cadoc	Cadoc was a Welsh saint who founded churches across Wales and Brittany
Buoc'h	Buwch	Cow
Mor	Mor	Sea
Kazeg	Caseg	Horse
Ki	ci	dog
Denved	Dafad	Sheep