

## **Silyan the Stork**

Long ago in the village of Malo Konjari there lived a gentle and good man named Bozhin. He had only one son, named Silyan, who had been terribly spoiled by his father and mother because he was their only surviving son. As a result they had allowed him to marry when he was only 16 years old, and already by the age of 17 he was the father of a son of his own, named Velko.

Because Silyan had been so spoiled as a child, he never helped with work on their farm, such as the plowing of the fields, tending the vineyard, harvesting the crops or tending the sheep. All of that was left to his father, Bozhin, and his mother, called Bozhinitza in the village tradition or by her real name, Stojna. Silyan's wife, Neda, and his sister Bosilka did all of the household chores. While the others worked Silyan would go off to town to have fun with his friends. He would spend his time drinking plum brandy and wine and eating all sorts of sweet treats.

As soon as would he arrive at the market, before he even had a chance to get down off his horse, he would order a sweet bun and some halvah. "I tell you, my friends, it's impossible to resist such a tasty treat!" he would say.

When he would say things like that, his friends in town would urge him to join them in a party that would last all day. Sometimes if he had enough money, he would spend two or three days in town enjoying himself with his friends, even when there was all sorts of work that needed doing at home.

His father often scolded him for not helping out at home and for staying out late with friends in town. But Silyan had long ago stopped listening to him. He just did whatever he pleased, with no concern for anyone but himself and his own enjoyment. His father tried to make him understand why he should do his share of the work on their farm. He would patiently explain the reasons Silyan ought to help them.

"My dear son," he would say. "You've got to quit spending all of your time with that bad crowd in town. They convince you to waste all of your money on treats, so that you end up as poor as they are! Don't listen to them. You need to heed the advice of your parents, who really care about you. Son, you'll someday have to pay for all of your bad behavior. Sons and daughters who refuse to listen to their parents eventually get punished for it.

"Did I ever tell you the story about Seeva and Chuleh. They were two birds who could be seen out in the fields, where they would scratch around, cackling and crowing, the one calling out see-vah, see-vah!, and the other answering chu-leh, chuleh! They had once been brother and sister. But they had been very bad. They never listened to anything their parents would say to them. They were always arguing with them and doing whatever they pleased.

"This, of course, made their mother and father very angry, and one day, in a fit of anger, their mother swore: 'Eh, you two, Seevah and Chuleh, I wish you would turn into birds and just fly away from here, out into the fields full of brambles. You can spend the rest of your days out there looking for each other, forever lost, calling back and forth trying to find the other. Then we would no longer have to put up with all the trouble you cause!' And it was just their bad luck that a nasty little devil heard this and turned them into birds. The next thing they knew, they were no longer human. They looked like chickens, and they had to scratch in the dirt for food, and they had to call back and forth to one another, searching each other out for companionship, but never finding each other.

"So you see, son, this could happen to you if you're not careful. If this story that has been passed down through the generations is at all true. And I wouldn't doubt that it is true. When did our parents and grandparents ever lie to us the way you young people lie to us? I'm just telling you all of this for your own good, because I really don't want anything bad to happen to you. But sometimes I just don't know what to do with you, and who knows, in some moment of anger, your mother or I might curse you, and something bad like that could happen to you as well."

But even as Bozhin was speaking to his son about all of this, Silyan was already thinking about how he would like to sneak away before they started tomorrow's work out in the hot sun. How he would rather spend the day in the cool shade at a café in town where they would serve him whatever he wanted, as if he were some rich gentleman. That was the life for him, not the daily routine of hard labor that his family had to do. So he decided that again the next day, he would get up and go to town, to get away from his father and all of his talk of people turned into birds. Who knew if it were true or not? But Silyan decided that he would take the chance. He was that stubbornly set in his ways. Maybe he would pick up some salt for them while he was in town, but that was about all he would do for them. He wasn't about to take orders from his parents.

So, having made up his mind, just as he had so many times before, Silyan got up early in the morning and snuck off to town before anyone knew he was gone. That day, it just so happened, Silyan met a stranger in the town. He was traveling the countryside collecting money from the Christian people in order to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Because he was a stranger to these parts, he asked the local tavern keeper if there was anyone who might guide him around the district for pay. The tavern keeper suggested that he talk to Silyan, who

decided that it might be interesting to roam the countryside with the man. They spent all summer and into the fall traveling the region together. But when it was time to receive his pay and return home, Silyan decided to continue traveling with the man. Eventually they boarded a ship at a distant port, bound for the Holy Land. But during the voyage a terrible storm rose up, and the boat was swallowed by the sea. Only Silyan somehow managed to survive, and he was cast up on a strange, desolate shore with no sign of other people anywhere.

It appeared that he had landed on a desert island. He found water to drink and some wild edible plants to eat. So he was able to keep himself alive, but he suffered terribly. "Oh mama and daddy," he cried. "What have I done? Here I am, stranded all by myself on this lonely shore. Do you ever see me in your dreams, here in this miserable place? You probably don't know if I'm alive or dead. It would have been better to die, killed by someone's gun, there in my own homeland, than to be cast away in this lonely place. At least then you could visit my grave and mourn my death. But if I die here the vultures will pick my bones clean and no one will ever know where I am. Oh daddy, what kind of a curse did you put on me?"

He longed to return to his lovely village home. If only he could be back with his kind and gentle family, he swore that he would make up for all he had done. He would serve at the church at the local monastery, and when work needed to be done at home he would gladly do it. But he doubted that he would ever see his home again. Instead, he would likely die alone in this desolate place.

The next day he decided to go exploring more distant parts of the island. So he built a cross in order to mark the place where he set off from, and set off in search of what he hoped might be a human settlement of some kind. He marked his trail well, so that if he had to, he could return to places where he knew he could find wild fruit trees and a spring for drinking water.

He grabbed a tree branch to use as a walking stick and to defend himself, if the need arose. After an hour of walking he discovered another spring and a patch of wild strawberries, but there was still no sign of people or of any sort of path to follow. So he continued the search. Eventually he reached a tall mountain ridge that he climbed until he reached the summit. From there he was able to see broad plains and gentle hills that reminded him of his home.

"Thank the Lord," he said to himself. "I don't know if this really is the familiar country of my birth, or if I am living some dream. I just don't know. But surely there must be people living in such countryside with its fields and pastures."

So he descended into the broad valley below. Some hours later Silyan found himself on the edge of the fields, and then he spied a path, clearly made by people who must live somewhere nearby. "Ah, finally signs of human settlement," he said to himself. "But who would they be? If they are of our own kind, then I'll be okay. But if they are from some foreign race, how will I make myself understood?"

These thoughts weighed on his mind as he made his way along the path through the fields. Silyan found edible greens in the fields to eat. And after a time, he descended a small ridge where he heard what sounded like human voices, but the sounds seemed foreign. He couldn't understand a word of it. It sounded more like the sounds that storks make. Poor Silyan grew frightened at the thought that they might be wild beasts, so he hid himself in some brush alongside the trail and peered at what appeared to be people from afar. He wasn't sure what he should do next. Should he make himself known or retreat down the path by which he had come.?

"Oh, what can I do?" he wondered. "I don't want to go back up the mountain, but I'm afraid to continue on. What if they decide to attack me? If they prove to be wild men from who knows where, what would I do? I'll just have to pray to God that they aren't, and take my chances with them. What else is there to do?"

So he emerged from the bushes, and with tears in his eyes he approached them. And when the man and woman saw Silyan they set down their scythes and began to talk to each other and then they began to laugh. Silyan thought that maybe he should say something to them, if it was only to say hello, whether they understood it or not. But as he drew nearer to them he decided to merely bow his head with his arms folded across his chest.

"Hey there, Silyan, why don't you speak up and greet us properly?" said the man. "Did you lose your voice from all that time you spent swimming in the sea?"

"Uncle, I wanted to say something to you, but I didn't think that you spoke my language. But here you are, understanding me, and you even know my name," replied Silyan. "Hey, uncle, please tell me how you know my name. I've never seen you before anywhere in the village or in town. I have been out roaming the countryside with a holy man all summer and into the fall, but I've never met anyone who matches your description. Please tell me where you know me from?"

"The winds blew you into this land of ours, where people like yourself have never been," the man said. "So now why don't you come home with us as our guest, and soon enough I'll answer all of your questions for you."

As the day turned to evening Silyan accompanied the husband and wife home. And as soon as they entered the house and the children saw Silyan they all began to shout with joy. "It's Silyan from the village of Konjari. Silyan has come to visit!"

Was this some dream? Here were children who also seemed to know his name. They were acting as if he were some old friend of theirs. What was going on here? Where was he? He couldn't help but wonder. Hopefully it would all become clear soon enough.

Everyone rushed to greet him. Then they had a wonderful dinner together. He was treated like an honored guest. Silyan couldn't get over his amazement at this place and the people here. He wondered if he might have somehow drifted into the country roundabout the Lake Ohrid and the Struga Valley, because there was a lake there similar to the one here. Could the sea have somehow brought him inland to the big lake? But he didn't think that was likely. "I can't be in Ohrid or Struga," he concluded. "Because the people there aren't like these people, with their long noses and tall, thin legs. These people are different from us," he decided. "No, they are definitely not like my own people. But where do they all know me from?"

While Silyan considered all of this the people left him alone, because they had work to do. But after a bit they all returned and some of the neighbors came by as well, and they began a conversation with him, and someone asked: "Eh, Silyan, how is your dad, Bozhin, doing?"

"And your mother, Stojna, is she well?" asked his host. "And your bride, Neda? Not to forget your sister Bosilka and your son Velko? Are they healthy and doing well? Ah, my boy, are you getting along any better with your dad? Are you listening to him a bit more nowadays? Or are you still making him angry?"

"I mostly just make him angry, uncle, instead of listening to him," said Silyan. "And as a result, I was punished by being cast away on your far off shore."

Then Silyan went on to recite the long list of his transgressions against his parents, but his hosts seemed to know all about his bad behavior even before he described it. Once he understood that, he asked them once again to tell him how they could possibly know him and all about what he did. Where could they have seen him or witnessed all of his actions without his knowing about it?

"Eh, Silyan my boy," his elderly host replied. "We've been in your village of Konjari long before you were ever born. We've lived at your house and spent many hours in your fields. So we know all about what goes on there, and we feel as if we're part of the family even. We probably know more about you and your behavior than even you yourself do. Do you know that?"

Silyan was astonished by what he had just heard. How could this be? Someone he'd never seen or heard of, telling him that he had such intimate knowledge of his family and life in their village. "Please tell me, brothers, how could you possibly know all about my home life? Are you angels or maybe fairies, with special powers? Are you birds who can fly into our home whenever you like? Please explain this, so that I can make some sense of it."

"How we know all about you and your home is because we visit your home every year. We become storks and fly to your village and home."

"But when do you turn into storks?" asked Silyan. "Since you are people now."

"Yes, now we are people, because that is what we are, but we become storks, Silyan, because of an old curse that was placed upon us and that made us unable to have children."

"Please, uncle, tell me what kind of curse made you unable to have children?" asked Silyan.

"It happened a long time ago, Silyan, that we lost our children and had to travel to your home in order to give birth. Once, long ago, there was a saintly old man who lived among us. At that time we also had some very bad children who refused to listen to anything their mothers and fathers had to say. They were completely out of control and did all sorts of terrible things. The only one who seemed to be able to teach them anything was the saintly old man. Their parents, on the other hand, were no help at all in keeping them out of trouble. But one day the old man quarreled with some of these children who had gathered under a tall maple tree on the edge of the village. These bad children began to kick and punch the old man, injuring him rather badly. That caused the old man to curse all of the people of our land. He called upon God to punish the bad children who had mortally wounded him. He wanted a deadly plague to come down on them. The old man died right after uttering this curse, and he was buried right there on the spot where he had died. And three years after his death two springs began to flow at the site, which continue to flow to this day. And, in fact, his curse soon came to pass. There was a terrible plague that swept through the land and killed all of the children, and no more were ever born among us since that day. We were left with no one to come after us. But God took mercy on us. He came to an old woman in a dream one night, and he told her that all of the people should gather at the springs. That we should all bathe in the first spring and that would transform us into storks, so that we would be able to fly to the Aegean and the Black Seas. There we could bear stork children and raise them up, and then when we flew back home, we could bathe in the second spring that would turn us back into people. So that is what we have been doing for a thousand years now, Silyan my boy!" the old head of the household told him.

"Thank God for that, but what a terrible curse you have had to endure. And my father told me a story about two birds that live in our fields, named Seeva and Chuleh. He told me that they were once a brother and sister who were punished for their bad behavior. They were cursed by their mother and father, and that caused them to be turned into birds who continually search for one another but never find each other. So you see, uncle, they also had a terrible curse, having to continually search but never finding each other. Until now I never really believed such things were possible, that the curse of a mother and father could do such a thing, but look at how I've been punished for what I did. And if what you've told me is true, then I don't see how I'll ever see my home again. Is there anyone who could help me find my way back home? If you know of anyone, please tell me, uncle."

"You should know, my name is also Silyan," announced his host. "I'm the head of our village. I'm called Uncle Klyack-klyack! A sorry thing for someone born a man to also have an animal name. But, as to your question, I'm afraid that there is no easy way for you to travel beyond the borders of our land to make your way home. The sea is often a stormy, raging moat that is dangerous to sail on, and the rugged mountain peaks form a barrier to travel by land. But there is a way for you to return home. You will need to bathe in the first spring, and when you emerge you will have been transformed into a stork. We will then fly together and I'll guide you home. But before we leave, you will gather a flask of water from the second spring. We'll fasten the flask by a cord around your neck for you to carry it with you home. And once we arrive there you can pour the water over you and it will turn you back into a man. Until we go, you can be our guest here. Share our food and drink, and we'll find you a bed," Uncle Klyack-klyack told him.

Then they found Silyan a place to sleep for the night and the next morning the old uncle came to him again. "If you don't believe that a man can become a stork, then come with me, Silyan, to the springs, and let me show you. I'll bathe in the spring and you'll see what happens for yourself."

The old man entered the spring and just as he'd predicted, he was turned into a stork. He flapped his wings and began to fly in large circles above the site. At the same time, he called out like a stork: "klyack klyack!" Then he landed once again beside the springs. And this time he bathed in the second spring, and it turned him back into a man. Then Silyan dipped himself into the first spring and was turned into a stork, and then he bathed in the second spring and it turned him back into a man. And so he came to know, first hand, the spring's power.

Silyan remained among them for several months. He helped in all the field work. Could this be the same Silyan who had never lifted a finger at home? Here he became hardworking and always ready to help. As the time approached for the great migration, Uncle Klyack-klyack sent out word to all of the newly married young people to prepare for the journey, to come to the spring in order to be transformed into storks. Several days later everyone gathered at the springs and they made the transformation and prepared for their flight over the sea. Before setting off the great flock of storks set down in a great marsh, where they feasted on frogs and other marsh life favored by storks. Silyan had joined the great flock this year. Before being turned into a stork he had also filled a flask from the second spring and tied the flask around his neck for the eventual return to human form.

After all of the birds had eaten their fill, the leader called to them to commence their journey, and the great flock rose as one high into the cloudy sky. After a full day's travel they set down again, this time on an island, where they rested and fed on more frogs. But suddenly two sea monsters emerged from the sea, in hopes of feeding on the storks, so the flock once again took to the air and set off again for Silyan's homeland. After another day's travel the storks finally reached the mainland, where they once again set down to rest and feed. This time it

was on the tender green shoots they found in the fields. This time when they took to the air, the storks dispersed into smaller groups that scattered in various directions. Silyan joined the group that was headed for his home village. As Silyan began to see familiar landmarks, the town of Prilep, the old ruins of the fortress of the legendary King Marko, and the Monastery of Treskavets, he was filled with joy. He eventually landed on a big rock outcropping with the intent of opening the flask tied around his neck right away and once again becoming a man, and then he would make his way home.

That was all fine, but as someone once said: 'Whatever you do in life, along with the good there is always some bad luck as well.' And so Silyan went from great joy to instant sorrow, when in a moment of carelessness he stumbled upon landing and smashed the flask of water he had been carrying with him on a rock, and the precious water was washed away. He tried to gather some of it with his fingers, but it was hopeless. He had lost most of it. He didn't have enough to turn him back into a man. So his joyous laughter turned into sorrowful weeping, as Silyan thought that he might never regain himself, that he might have to remain a stork for the rest of his life.

"This is what comes of not listening to my mother and father," he sighed. "At least God saw fit to return me to my homeland. I should be grateful that I won't die far from home."

With these thoughts Silyan flew on home to the village of Konjari, and he set down on Uncle Klyack-klyack's perch on their house roof. "Silyan," the old stork said. "You know you are dear to me, but you'll have to take up your own perch at the other end of the roof. This one has been my perch for many years. But don't worry, I'll help you get back to the spring again, and you can try again, though it is a shame that you broke the flask and you'll have to go through so much extra effort now. But God gives us strength to repair the damage."

Silyan accepted what the old uncle had said, and he moved to the other end of the roof to perch. Because it was still early, only his father was up and tending to his chores. The moment Silyan saw him he burst into tears. After a time everyone in the household got up and each of them began to see to chores. His mother began milking the cows. His wife saw to the sheep. His son let the pigs and the calves out into the pasture. His sister swept out the house. Silyan had never joined in the work of the household, but it tugged at his heart to see them all now at their work, and to know that he was condemned to live apart from them.

Once he had wept his fill, Silyan could no longer bear to simply sit and watch them all without being able to speak, so he flew off with a heavy heart, out over the surrounding fields, over the meadows, the vineyards and the pastures where the village cattle grazed. He roamed the entire valley until he finally reached a marsh where he could feast on frogs and other small creatures.

"Oh, how pathetic I am," he lamented. "Instead of the delicious ham I once got to eat, now I am reduced to eating frogs. Instead of feasting on fresh fish and clams in some pleasant tavern, now I have to live on worms, lizards and grasshoppers. But let it be. I had my chance to heed my father's advice, but I didn't listen, and so here I am. I only ask you, precious Lord, don't take my soul until I can somehow return to my human form, and until my parents have seen how I have repented and how I would work at whatever is needed. And how I would listen to what they have to say now."

As much as Silyan was aware of the fact that he was a stork, he didn't quite realize all of what that meant. So he stood in the yard at a short distance and watched his wife as she milked the cows and saw to the needs of the little calves. But his son, Velko, who had no idea that the stork was his father, and seeing how the stork petted the calves with his wing, became alarmed. He was afraid that the stork might harm the calves. So he called his mother: "Mama, look how the stork is interested in our calves. Maybe he'll steal one!"

As he called to his mother he swung the staff in his hand and hit the stork a sharp blow on the head. Silyan was knocked so silly that he couldn't take flight. When Velko saw that the stork hadn't flown off, he seized him by the neck and shouted to his mother: "Mother, mother, I've grabbed the stork!"

About then Silyan's mother had come out to help with the milking, and Velko told her about how he had hit the stork and grabbed it by the neck. Poor Silyan realized then just how vulnerable he was as a stork. His own son could strangle him if he chose to. Now that he had hold of Silyan he might choose to tie him up by a rope by one leg and keep him for entertainment the way children sometimes did with small birds they would catch.

"Let him go, Velko, my child, let the stork go," Neda said to him. "It would be wrong to harm him, especially since it is clear that he is a widower, just as I am a widow without your father. It has been nearly two years since he went away, and there hasn't been a trace of him anywhere. What curse caused me to become a widow so young!"

Velko heeded his mother's words and let the stork go, and Silyan flew up onto the top of the house. He gasped for air, still trembling from the terrible fright he had experienced when Velko had grabbed him.

A few days later Silyan visited the sheepfold to see the ewes that were lambing. This time the sheep dog managed to seize Silyan by the tail. If the shepherd hadn't ordered the dog to let him go, the dog would have soon plucked all of his tail feathers out.

"Look at the poor widowed stork," said the shepherd. "If I hadn't stopped him, the dog would have plucked him bare." And so, if it hadn't been for the shepherd, once again Silyan might have been killed.

Not long after that his father, Bozhin, yoked up the oxen and went off to the field to plow. He brought his grandson Velko along to drive the ox team. Silyan decided to come watch them as they plowed the field. After they had plowed a few furrows Silyan noticed how the freshly cut furrows contained big, fat juicy worms. So he hopped down into the furrow and began to eat them. "I might just as well have a meal while they work," Silyan said to himself. And as he hopped along the furrow snatching worms, he soon came within a few feet of his father.

About then Velko turned back to look at his grandfather, and when he spied the stork he shouted: "Grandpa, look out behind you! It's our stork!"

"Fine, grandson, fine, keep driving the oxen," he told the boy.

They plowed another furrow and again Velko spotted the bird right behind his grandfather, and being a child, he couldn't resist shouting again: "Grandpa, grandpa, the stork is behind you, turn around and look!"

"Just keep driving the team, grandson, and don't let him distract you, because we still have a lot of work to do before dinner time," Bozhin replied.

They continued to plow and because Silyan continued to follow them, edging ever closer to them as he scooped up the worms with his beak, Velko called out again: "Grandpa, grandpa, look at the stork, he's right behind you again!"

"That's about enough about that darn stork, boy!" He shouted and then struck the bird in his right leg with his staff, breaking the bone. Silyan recoiled from the pain and he flew off back to the house, where he perched on the roof on his one good leg and wept at the fierce pain in his leg. Many days would pass before the leg would eventually heal.

That evening as they ate their evening meal, Velko told the rest of the family about the stork in the field and how his grandpa had struck the bird with his staff.

"That was wrong, to strike the poor bird," said Neda. "Why do that? He's just a lonely widower like myself. He didn't deserve to be hit."

"It wasn't right, hitting him like I did," admitted Bozhin. "He didn't deserve to be hit in the leg with my staff, but Velko made me angry and I just lashed out. He kept getting distracted from his work by the stork and doing a poor job of it. So I struck out in anger. It was wrong, I know, but I couldn't help myself at the time. I hope that God will forgive me for what I did, blinded by anger. But wrong is wrong." Silyan, who was sitting atop the chimney, heard everything that was said.

Not long after, while everyone else was off in the fields working, Silyan's sister Bosilka sat at home in the yard and worked on a necklace that would be part of her future wedding dress. In the middle of her work she took some time out to tend to the pigs, and while she was away Silyan, who had been sitting atop the chimney watching her work, flew down and grabbed the necklace in his beak. Then he flew back up and hid it in the straw nest where he slept on the roof. Bosilka, when she returned, searched for the missing piece of jewelry everywhere she could think to look, but she couldn't find it.

A few weeks later Silyan's wife was sitting at home alone in the yard on a stool and knitting a sweater with two knitting needles, the way widows will do. She knit and she wept for her sad fate, for the loss of her husband. "I wouldn't grieve quite so much, Lord, for my Silyan, if he had only died here at home," she lamented. "At least then I would know where his grave was and I could light candles at the site for him. But how can I do that when he was probably lost at sea along with the holy man on his pilgrimage."

Silyan heard these words and they tore at his heart, but there was nothing he could do. He would just have to endure his sorry fate. Just about then Neda stood up and went into the house to fetch something. And when she did, Silyan swooped down again and snatched one of her knitting needles in his beak and flew away with it. He hid the needle alongside the necklace in the straw nest. When Neda returned she too searched everywhere for the lost knitting needle, but in vain. She searched and searched and swore in her frustration, but she never found it.

"What has made you so angry?" asked her mother-in-law. "What bad thing has happened? Come, tell me, daughter, so that I can see if you have a right to be so angry."

Neda told her about the knitting needle that she had lost when she had stepped into the house for a moment, as if someone had taken it. "It was right for someone to take the knitting needle from you, daughter," her mother-in-law responded. "Because it wasn't right for you to be knitting a black sweater, as if you were a widow. We don't know if Silyan is alive or not. He could still be with the holy man somewhere, but you wanted to think of him as dead and that he would never return to you. It's not right, daughter. Pray to God to bring him home. There's no point weeping and mourning for him just yet. Here a few days ago Bosilka lost a necklace in a similar way in this same yard, but it wasn't a human being. Maybe sometimes people do die and we never hear a thing about them ever again, but we don't mourn the loss of a knitting needle, it's not worth crying over."

Not long after that they prepared for Bosilka's wedding. She had been engaged for some time and finally the big day arrived. Although they hadn't wanted to give her away in Silyan's absence, the groom no longer wanted to wait for his bride. He had said, "It is time for you to decide to either take me or leave me."

Bozhin announced that her new in-laws could come with their son and take Bosilka home on the coming Sunday. The family arrived at Bozhin's gate that day with the godfather leading the way, with a wagon loaded with wine, followed by the groom and his family, and with bagpipers playing and young men firing pistols in the air. The wedding party rode horses all decked out in colorful finery and with banners waving in the breeze. It was a beautiful sight for the people of Konjari to behold. Everyone was in a joyous holiday mood. Only Silyan the stork felt sad as he stood atop his father's house with his head hung low, because he was forced to watch his sister's wedding only from a distance.

"Oh, what a terrible curse this is," he said to himself. "To be punished for my disobedience to my mother and father by being turned into a stork and forced to perch atop the family house like this. If I were still a man, I could be among those joyfully greeting the arrival of the wedding guests."

The groom's family entered and sat down at the prearranged tables to eat. But Silyan's wife took her son by the hand and moved off to sit alongside one of the haystacks and mourn the absence of her husband on this joyous occasion. "You shouldn't mourn for Silyan," Velko told her. "Because daddy will be returning on Easter after his journey to the Holy Land." When Silyan heard these words he grew sadder still, almost wishing that he had died so that he wouldn't have to endure this.

The wedding took place without him, and then the time came for the storks to return to their home to the south. The young storks born that year had learned to fly high in the sky, and the old stork headman sent out word to all of the storks from his village that it was time to make the return journey. They would leave on St. Panteleimon's Day. And he sent word to Silyan to be prepared to join them.

For the next few days Silyan roamed his home village and the local region, all of the familiar places of his youth, and he visited the Monastery of the Holy Mother at Treskavets and prayed for help to someday return as a man to his home, to journey back to the land of the storks and to return the next year with them, and that time to once again become a man. And he promised, in return he would serve three years in the monastery. Then he flew from the monastery back to the village, and on St. Panteleimon's Day he joined old Uncle Klyack-klyack and the other storks, all of the young parents and their children, as they set out for home..

When they arrived there, he again did his rightful share of the field work, helping whenever and wherever someone needed a hand. And when the time came again for the annual migration, he was ready and he once again prepared a flask filled with water from the second spring and fastened it around his neck to carry with him.

As he had the year before, he made the long, arduous journey with the other storks to his home region. However, the journey was not without its special challenges. At one point in

their journey the flock was attacked by eagles. The storks and the eagles fought a fierce battle and many storks died that day. The storks had passed over a high mountain range and then landed in a large field in the valley below, filled with grasshoppers for them to eat. But when they landed, the eagles spotted them and swooped down on the storks in a swift attack by a large flock of them. The storks fought the eagles for three days and three nights, and the blood flowed like water on the field of battle. Silyan didn't take part, the old stork headman shielded him from the attackers. He was, after all, under his protection as a guest. And the eagles were somehow afraid of the strange stork with the glass flask attached around his neck. Silyan found a small cave to hide himself in until the battle was over. Fortunately, the storks prevailed in the end, and they were able to eventually continue their journey to the land of Silyan's birth. When the happy storks finally arrived at their destination and the individual families dispersed throughout the village and the surrounding villages and towns, Silyan and the old headman made their way to Konjari.

Silyan immediately flew into the barn and opened the flask and drenched himself thoroughly in the magical water. Suddenly he was transformed back into a man- the man that was familiar to his mother and father, sister, wife and son. Silyan left the barn and made his way to the house and entered it. Because it was early and the weather was not very good- rainy and overcast, as it often is at the end of winter- the family was inside, huddled around the woodstove. The family dog, Liso, who lay by the door, failed to recognize Silyan, and began to bark loudly.

"Liso, girl, what are you barking at?" he said to her.

"Why, mother, Silyan just spoke at the door!" Neda called to Silyan's mother.

They all leapt to their feet and rushed to the door. Weeping and kissing him, they greeted Silyan, and he kissed his mother and father on their right hands as a gesture of respect, and asked forgiveness for all he had done. His mother put a cup of homemade plum brandy on the stove to heat up, while Neda brought the largest stool over for Silyan to sit on. She took off his sandals and washed his feet and then brought out his best Easter clothes to wear. Velko woke from his nap and Silyan lifted him onto his lap and stroked his hair and kissed him.

Word spread in the village that Silyan had returned from his pilgrimage. Everyone rejoiced at his safe return and hurried over to see him. The house soon filled up with villagers, all of the village elders, and each of them in turn said to him: "Welcome, pilgrim Silyan, welcome back!"

"Don't call me pilgrim, dear friends," Silyan said to them. "Because I was not so fortunate as to make it to the Holy Land. The holy man who was guiding me drowned in the sea on the way. Please don't ask me about all that has happened to me in the past three years. You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Just let me say that now I know that I never should have

been so disobedient to my parents. But tell me, brothers, how have things been here in the village?"

"Well, things have been good for us here, but you must tell us of your travels in the world. Tell us what you have seen. Certainly you've seen some amazing things. And how did the holy man come to drown in the sea?" asked his father.

"Eh, how, you ask, well, it happened after we boarded a ship in Salonica. A terrible storm came up and it eventually destroyed our boat. Huge waves kept crashing over the sides of the boat and finally the entire ship broke apart in the storm. I had the good fortune to be cast up on a wild shore alive. I found a spring to drink from and something to eat from some wild fruit trees. I slept in the woods that night and the next day I set off in search of other people. I found wild strawberries to eat on the way, that kept me alive during my journey. Eventually after a long day of walking through mountain forests I arrived at a meadow where a man and a woman were harvesting hay. This was all to the good, but I discovered that they weren't all that much like us. They had long legs and noses almost twice the length of ours. Amazingly, as soon as they saw me they called out my name and acted as if they had known me all their lives. They treated me as an honored guest, welcoming me in their homes, feeding me and finding me a place to sleep."

"But how in the world could they have known you, Silyan, and greeted you as an old friend?"

"It turned out that these people are the storks who come to live with us every year," said Silyan. "They have two springs there with incredible powers. The waters of the first spring can turn you into a stork and the waters of the second will turn you back into a man." And Silyan went on to tell them all about how he had also been turned into a stork for the trip home, and of his adventures before finally arriving among them that day. "But I know that you don't believe me," he said.

"But what fool would swallow such a story, Silyan. That you could have been turned into a stork!" one man declared.

"Brothers, as you can see, Silyan has traveled far and wide in the world beyond our home, and he has learned some great story-telling in the process," declared another.

"Ah, yes, brothers, that's so," said another. "He's certainly learned some clever things while roaming the world. Stories to amaze us all."

But I'm not making all of this up, brother," declared Silyan. "It's the real truth about my travels. I really was a stork and I really lived in the land of the storks and flew between their land and our own with them. I even worked in the fields with the storks who live atop our house. I know that it is hard to believe, but I couldn't begin to make such a story up. You've

heard the story of the birds called Seeva and Chuleh, well, I was also disobedient to my parents and that was one reason why I had to spend a time as a bird. In my case, as a stork."

"We all know the story of Seeva and Chuleh, the brother and sister who were turned into birds, but that was a different age, an age of miracles, when the Lord walked the earth long ago and the saints. And they listened to what people said to them. But nowadays it is the devil who roams the earth deceiving people. So we don't believe stories like your own, that you were turned into a stork."

When it was clear to Silyan that no one believed him, he started to tell his entire story from the beginning. He told about what a lazy, disobedient son he had been, and how his father had warned him of the harm that might befall him as a result. He then told about how he had joined the holy man in his travels and on his fatal last voyage to the Holy Land. Then he described his adventures in the land of the storks, the help and guidance he had received from old Uncle Klyack-klyack, the trips with the flask of water tied around his neck, and his eventual return to his home that day.

He could see that the villagers still thought that it was all just a wild tale to justify all of his time away from home. So he tried a different approach. "Eh, mother and father, you still don't believe me, do you? Do you remember a stork that perched atop your house last year at the far end? Is he there again this year or not?"

"Well, yes, there was such a bird, but what of it?"

"Well, I was that stork that perched at the far end of the house! Mother, do you remember the day you milked the cows and I petted the calves with my wing and Velko hit me with his staff? Do you remember how I was slow to fly away and Velko grabbed me and Neda told him to let me go?"

"Now how could you know that? Were you watching from hiding somewhere? Or did somebody tell you about this?" asked his mother.

"Okay, but did someone also tell me about the time the dog, Liso, grabbed the stork and the shepherd made him let go? Did someone tell me that as well?"

He turned to the shepherd. "Well, is that right, Smilo?"

"Yes, that is what happened alright. The stork got grabbed and I made the dog let it go before she could injure it."

"Someone must have told you about that," said his father. "That's how you must have known about it."

"Eh, well, now if you still don't believe me, what about the incident out in the field, when you were plowing? Velko kept telling you about the stork behind you, and he kept getting distracted from his work and making crooked furrows. The third time he said something about the stork you got angry and struck the stork with your staff. You broke my leg and it took a long time to heal. And that evening you expressed regret for what you had done. Isn't that so, dad?"

"That is the truth, alright, son, Silyan, but again you could have learned all of this from someone else. Some other way. I just can't believe your story."

"You believe the story of Seeva and Chuleh, dad, but not my story?" And he showed them his right leg with evidence of a recent injury that had healed. "Look at this, father. Look at where it was injured and has healed."

When they saw the leg they were all impressed, but they were still not convinced. "Who knows, son. Yes, you've had an injury. Maybe it was as you've said, but it is still so hard to believe!" said his father.

"It's the truth, father, friends," said Silyan. "It's all true. My time in the land of the storks, that no one else has ever visited. The work I did there. The travel to and from their land. I don't have any reason to tell you a tall tale. I do have one last proof for you. One day my sister Bosilka sat out in the yard and worked on a necklace for her wedding, and when she turned her back, it disappeared. A few days later my wife, Neda, was knitting while sitting on a stool out in the yard. It made me angry that she was knitting a black shawl that a widow would wear. So when her back was turned I stole the knitting needle that she thought she had misplaced. Didn't it disappear, Neda, mother?"

"That's true, son," his mother answered. "But who took it?"

"I did. I took it," he said. "Someone, go climb up on the roof and look inside the straw stork's nest. You'll find it there along with the necklace. You'll see."

Smilo the shepherd climbed up onto the roof and checked inside the nest, and he found the lost items there. Everyone was amazed.

"Well, praise the Lord, if it isn't so!" they all declared. "A man became a stork!" They all believed his amazing story, and the people still tell the story to this day.

### **Note about the story**

The folk lore collector and tailor from the Macedonian town of Prilep, Marko Tsepenkov (1829-1920), heard this tale from one of his visitors some time in the mid-nineteenth century. Tsepenkov collected many such Macedonian folk tales from the oral folk tradition and wrote them down for the first time. The tale of Siljan Strkot is probably the best known and the longest of all Macedonian folk tales. Tsepenkov certainly added his own personal artistic touches to the story as he wrote it down. The present translation is essentially faithful to the original with only minor interventions in order to make it more accessible to modern day readers. The translation of this story derives from the text as published in the book SILYAN The Stork, Tsepenkov, Marko, Kultura, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, 2001. (That book contains both the original written in the nineteenth century dialect of the Prilep region of Macedonia by Marko Tsepenkov and a modern day standard literary Macedonian language version created by Jasminka Janeva.)