

MALTESE LEGENDS OF THE SIBYLLA⁽¹⁾

By BERTHA ILG

Translated by VERA VENOUR

[This study, originally published by Bertha Ilg in 1914, was unknown in Malta until 1959, when I read the title *Maltesische Legenden von der Sibylla* on the fly leaf of her book *Indianermärchen* which was on display at the Book Exhibition held in Kiel during the International Congress for Folk-Narrative Research 19.8.59—24.8.59. On the 23rd September, 1959 I wrote to Frau Koessler-Ilg, who was living at San Martin de los Andes, Argentina, and asked her whether she could let me have a copy as it was not available at any library in Malta. On the 15th December, 1959 she replied: "I have no time just now to go over the chaos of old papers, but as you seem to be interested I send you the one copy left. Can you copy it and give it back to me? If I can find in the meantime another copy you may keep it. It is not a big work, only a few leaves, but I have the feeling that nobody gathered these fables, or what they are . . . I wonder if you find something interesting in the Sibylla tales! . . ." On May 6, 1960 I wrote saying: ". . . As for your *Maltesische Legenden von der Sibylla* I have had it copied and I am returning it to you with many, many thanks. . . I am sure it is an important contribution. Except for Fr. Magri, who mentions the *Sittazbrilja* motif in one of his tales, I think nobody has ever collected these fables."

Dr F. J. Damato, M.D., D.O. (Oxon.) D.O.M.S., was good enough to prepare a tentative translation from the German original and on the 23rd September, 1963 I informed Frau Koessler-Ilg that I intended to publish a translation of her Maltese Legends of the Sibylla in the "*Maltese Folklore Review*." She agreed to this and by 1968 a fresh translation with a view to publication had been made out by Mrs Vera Venour, of the Maltese-German Circle, through the good offices of Her Excellency Frau Wollenweber, wife of the then German Ambassador to Malta, and with the co-operation of Mr J. Pisani, at that time Chairman of the Circle, and of the Rev. J. M. Milne, M.A., B.D.

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1. — *Is-settisibella* or *Settusibilla*, The Wise Ruler

This beautiful woman of great wisdom lived from the time of Adam's sin to the birth of Mary, that is for exactly 4000 years and some days. She was full of confidence and had the most ambitious plans, and this was the reason: All young girls from Adam's and Eve's first daughter to the birth of Mary were ensnared and brought to fall by the Tempter so that they ended in the eternal fire. The clever *Is-settisibella* thought that only in her, the most beautiful of women, the wisest of the wise and the proudest of the proud, could the Son of the Master, who was to become man, take flesh. She could divine all things and from the beginning gave advice to the Master and prophesied what would become of this one or that one were he to be created. She was held in high esteem and her courage was so great

(1) Originally published in *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde in Berlin*, Heft I, 1914. For Legends of the Sibylla confused with the Queen of Sheba, see Bousset in *Herzog's Realencyclopaedie für Protestantische Theologie* 18, 265 (1906). R. Koehler, *Kleinere Schriften* 2, 87, 1900. W. Hertz, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* 1905, S. 436. Kuehnau, *Schlesische Sagen* 1, 555, 617 (1910).

that she knew neither fear nor restraint. Nothing was new to her. She smiled at inventions and only said that a thousand years ago even the stupidest had known about it. "To you it is new today because of the effort it took to rediscover it. You remain small people". But she never thought about the birth of a girl destined to be the mother of the Son of God, because the Master had never withheld anything from her. She had always been privileged and claimed all honours for herself alone. In return she concerned herself with the great and small events and ruled with a firm and wise hand. She knew how to make nature bow to her wishes and also the hearts and spirits of man.

No human soul knows when the Master had created this assistant. Some of the wise hold that she has existed from the beginning of the world, others that she is one of the angels who fell with Lucifer, and yet others see in her the creature whom the Master had destined to be Adam's wife, who found her too clever and wise to be his equal when she was meant to be subject to him. The beauty of Is-settisibella never faded because she remained chaste and pure, although the times were corrupt. She had a supernatural air about her which enchanted and her wisdom was not of an earthly kind.

She was the sister of the strong Samson, the wise Solomon and the patient Job, but she was by far superior to all three in strength, wisdom and patience. She was older than they and her wisdom and other virtues were of the ages. She had been ruling for some thousands of years when the Master gave those three to her as brothers. They had a great respect for her, but feared her because she knew everything and she rather liked to start not only quarrels but also lengthy wars. For she was also a fighter and led her people under various disguises.

She was also particularly capable and learned as a doctor. One day, during the years of peace between wars, she started to write a book on Medicine, for she knew a cure for every disease. The first book dealt with the most serious inner diseases which doctors today call incurable. She described the treatment and named the important herbs. At that time nobody but her had any knowledge of these. The second book also dealt with inner diseases, but those that could be more easily recognised by outward symptoms. So she wrote books about all the ills that can afflict man until she had filled nine books. The tenth and last now was not meant for those who had some knowledge of medicine but for the ordinary people who wanted to cure their small ailments themselves. It dealt with headaches, indigestion, treatment of eyes that could not bear the light, and earache. It mentioned sprained limbs and women's complaints. For all these there was a simple treatment — hot poultices, warm drinks, scalding for fingers attacked by worm whitlow or scabies; for other ailments she advised blood letting and leeches, for stiff limbs bathing in seawater until they become supple again, for warts on the skin there was the wolf's bane (*tenghuda*). She gave the recipe for the "spiced wine", a mixture of many odd things including the blood of various animals and a number of herbs — a drink to treat shock. From her also comes the recipe of the potion of the seven mixtures, which many have found a blessing although the doctors speak against it. It consisted of seawater, soup of boiled coxcomb (common celo-

sia, amarante), cloves, yellow safran, seeds of maidenhair (capelvenerae), orange peel and red pepper (2).

Compared with the other books, though, this tenth was almost worthless; it did not deal with anything difficult. In short, the ten books contained the essence of all wisdom. The thoughtful reader could even work out from them how long a life would last or whether the life of a patient or a newly born child was worth preserving or destroying. There was written in them of love, of the power of wisdom and riches and how to obtain and to keep them. It was a learned work of such excellence that no ordinary man could ever have written it.

Now she locked the ten books in a glass case and wrote on it: "Anyone who wants to learn to be a doctor, come to me!" She placed the glass case so that passers-by could not miss it. Naturally it was seen and talked about by many. It also became widely known that this wisest of women had used in her recipes everything nature provides from worms and poisonous animals to plants and diverse waters. Everything had been explained but the knowledge was later lost and that is why we now have so many incurable and infectious diseases. But on with the story:

One day a young man came to her and wanted to know the price for the ten books. She said: "One hundred gold pieces, the large ones with my brother's seal on them." The young man laughed scornfully as it seemed too much to him. Now he was one of the richest and noblest in the country. Is-Settisibella, or as other called her, Settusibilla, replied: "Without these my books you will never attain knowledge. But a doctor without this knowledge is worth less than a donkey, for the latter can do no harm. You would do well to buy the books." But he began to haggle and to bargain. After much haggling, at last he went away and she burnt one of the books as she had threatened, the first and best one she burnt. The next day the young man came again and was surprised to see only nine books. He had taken her threat for empty words. Now he tried to bargain even more and said: "A hundred gold pieces with the Sultan's seal for ten books — for nine surely much less." But she demanded a hundred as before. Again they did not agree and angrily the young man left. So she burnt a second book, and to make a long story short, she destroyed nine books, but she never lowered the price. The young man at last bought the tenth book for this high price and behold, the important things were not in it. She ridiculed him and said: "You were a fool to hesitate to give a hundred gold pieces for the ten books. You are a fool because knowledge will never enter your head. You remain a fool because the book cannot help your foolishness. Now go and do not let the gravediggers wait too long." And she was proved right. The young man became an incapable doctor and had to pay heavily for his failures. Now the story continues:

Once it so happened that Solomon, while they were having one of their quarrels, suffered from an eye disease to such an extent that he could not

(2) The narrator, a street labourer, has an exact knowledge of most plants to be found on the island. He enjoys a certain reputation among the people as an expert of the 'old mixtures'. As he indulges a lot in quack healing and is afraid of the police, he revealed the above 'medical book' of the Is-Settisibella only very reluctantly.

bear even subdued daylight or the light from his oil lamps. An evil sup-
puration formed and he tore at his lashes in pain. He suffered greatly and
despaired like a beggar beset by dogs. But he did not want to ask his sister,
the clever Settusibella, for help, because he knew she would give it only
with mockery and scorn or not at all. So he tried all kinds of remedies.
He had herbs brought to him from far and near, he bathed the affected
parts continuously and even tried sorcerers with their magic, he, the king
and judge. But the evil got worse with every day and he lived in the con-
stant fear and terror of growing blind, helpless like a leper. So he suffered
for four whole years and almost daily he tried a new cure. Quacks and
charlatans now had free access and made fat profits. At last he saw that all
his efforts were in vain and he said to himself: "I must try to get the
remedy out of my sister by a ruse. She will not freely help me and to ask
her humbly is beneath my dignity."

So he called a large crowd of children in his city to him and told them:
"Gather together and run and skip along the streets rejoicing and shouting.
I shall reward you handsomely. Run, as if by chance, towards the palace
of my sister and there make an even louder noise. If she comes out to ask
the cause of your shouting, tell her: 'We are shouting and rejoicing be-
cause Solomon, our Sultan, is at last healed from his eye disease and can
enjoy again the light of day and of his thousand oil lamps.' Then listen
carefully what she says and tell me word for word. Your reward will be
great."

So the children, who could think of no merrier task, went along and
made an indescribable noise. When they came to the palace of Settusibella
she came out as expected wondering what it was all about (for she was of
a very inquisitive nature and had to get to the bottom of everything) and
enquired the reason for the children's merrymaking and the children an-
swered: "Our Sultan's eyes have been healed and he can see the light again.
That is why we are happy and merry." She answered: "I can well believe
it. As a clever man he will have touched his eyes only with his elbows."
The children went back and reported everything word for word. Then
Solomon struck his forehead and exclaimed: "As I thought! To touch with
the elbows means not to touch at all, so now I will give up all my cures."
From then on he only bathed his eyes by holding them open in a basin
with clean water. Soon they were clean and free from the poisonous and
suppurating tissue that had formed.

The pitiless Settusibella who herself rules over great kingdoms, lived
for a long time together with Solomon. This she did to test him and to
discover the secret powers he possessed within him. So it also came about
that Settusibella was the first cause of his downfall. He betrayed himself
to her during his hours of leisure and pleasure. For Settusibella never gave
without return and was always intent on her own advantage. She often
quarrelled and disputed with Solomon. He often got very angry because she
could always excel and outwit him. If they happened to talk about the first
parents she would ask him: "What did Eve think when she knew she
was to become a mother?" And Solomon answered: "She felt a consolation
to be so blessed." But she laughed at him and said: "Wrong. She was
in fear of herself, a fear growing to madness, so that Adam had to escape

and hide from her until her time had come." Or she asked Solomon: "Was it according to the Master's will that Eve became a mother a second time?" Solomon answered: "Certainly, he wanted to populate the earth." But Settusibella mocked him, "Wrong. You can tell by the consequence: Cain, the child of sin, conceived against the commandment of the Master, carried a curse and lived only to kill the fruit of the second sin committed on Eve. The Master would have had other ways and means to populate the earth had he so wanted." For Settusibella well knew history of old, for she had lived from the beginning and was in communication with all the spirits. She knew in whose body one of the wonderful pearls was carried and she could tell its way exactly. She herself believed that she carried a pearl within herself which probably explains her indescribable pride, for she always hoped to become the mother of her Master's Son. We will tell of this and then break off the story.

First we must say that she solved in a short time the most difficult problems which Solomon and other wise men had taken weeks and months to think up in order to confuse and shame her. And as she surpassed Solomon in wisdom she set him problems in her turn, which he was never able to solve. So there was always quarrel and strife between the two. Each wanted to play the master, and whenever Settusibella seemed to be submissive for an hour, Solomon could be certain that she planned mischief against him. But they ruled over the whole world and had great power over hearts and spirits. Solomon also believed he felt the wonderful pearl within himself and that this was the source of his inner powers.

And now we will tell where her belief that her body was blessed eventually got her.

She liked to live together with young girls. It was her pleasure to watch them grow in body and soul. She founded a kind of school. It had a different name in those days, but we will call it a school. In this school no girl could be admitted unless she was physically developed. She explained to parents who wanted their daughters admitted before their time, that spiritual growth is in relation to physical growth and that therefore she could accept for education only fully developed girls. She kept these girls, who all came from the best families, until their eighteenth year, no longer. After this age their education was completed. Mostly she had 15, sometimes 17 girls. Now there was something mysterious about this school and the pupils were sworn to silence. Further it was the custom that good families sent their daughters to the school of Settusibella before they were married, and so it happened that Mary⁽³⁾, the future Mother of God, also came to this school and had to remain there, despite her tears, which would have moved anyone, even those who have a stone in the place where the heart should be. But not Settusibella.

The mistress had introduced a particular custom. Each morning she asked the girls, who had to appear singly before her, what they had dreamed. Sometimes she would explain the dreams. But she did not do this merely to satisfy her curiosity. One girl for instance would tell her she had dreamt of a beautiful dress, another of half eaten boiled broad beans (a favourite

(3) See De Nino, *Usi e costumi abruzzesi* 4, 16; Dähnhardt, *Natursagen* 2, 263 nr. (4c)

dish of the Maltese), the third of a handsome young man, and so on. She dealt briefly with all these girls and was only intent to learn what the quiet Mary had dreamed. She seemed most concerned about this and she had a feeling as if this maid carried the pearl, that sanctifies the body, and not she, Settusibella, herself. But strangely, Mary never dreamed, which pleased the mistress so much, that she marked her out from all the others. She told herself again and again: "The conception of the Son of God will be preceded by a dream, that comes from the pearl. I myself must be the Chosen One and shall be the Beloved of the Master."

One day she again asked the quiet Mary and she told her joyfully: "I dreamt that a seed germinated in my womb, became a plant and threw out shoots, until it was a tree whose leafy branches spread out over the world, giving shade and rest." So the quiet Mary told her in all simplicity, but the mistress was beside herself with rage and frustration, and she tore out her hair which was twice the length of her body. She beat her head against the wall, bit her tongue until it bled, rolling herself on the floor like an unclean animal, uttering wild sounds as of madness.

Heaven was watching this wild fury, and because she was the greatest teacher, had lived from the beginning, and had been marked by so many favours by the Master, which made her believe she was blessed by the divine pearl, they had pity on her, and perhaps also wanted to turn her wrath away from the quiet girl Mary.

So an angel flew down to earth and said to her: "Be quiet, Lady. Whatever you demand will be granted to you, but the one desire you must renounce, to become the Mother of the Son of God. This favour cannot be granted to you, it is reserved for a pure virgin. So ask another favour."

But the great, wise lady now began a mad raging, worse than before and the angel was horrified when he saw her behaviour. Thrashing like a wild animal, and with the most degrading gestures that left nothing of her greatness, she screamed like one possessed: "I want to live in Hell forever!" At that moment a chasm opened, a yawning pit, and she plunged down into the underworld.

Since then she goes on living there as she had lived on earth. She lives and cannot die, she is doomed to remain there for eternity, because for her, who has known about the pearl and its meaning, there can be no eternal death. But she does not feel the fire and the torment that allows the damned no peace. She lives relatively happily, still reigning, if only over the Kingdom of Shadow, but still a sovereign.

But the serene and quiet Mary unknowingly prepared to become the Mother of the Saviour. Now one of those days it came to pass that Lucifer, who until then had ruled over the dominion of hell, was charged with an errand by his new mistress, the Settusibella, which he was to carry out immediately. Now hear:

Until that time no maiden had resisted him, in fact there was no virgin except the quiet Mary. All of them were fallen girls and all of them doomed to live in hell. So Lucifer resolved to tempt the quiet Mary and then to present the proud Settusibella with the proof of her fall. He took the shape of a handsome and winning young man and appeared before the serene

and beautiful Mary. With subtle flattery in his voice he said: "You fairest of the fair, there can never be a sin in submission that is freely granted, but only when forced upon you, or given frivolously and without thought. You can freely grant me a favour, a kiss. Let me kiss you. Your purity and all that is radiant and good in you will be awakened and will raise you above your companions. Nothing you do could ever overshadow your destiny, everything can only make it shine more brightly. You will understand, and this will make you receptive and prepare you. Let me be your teacher." And the quiet Mary, the only girl of her time who was not destined for Hell, said: "Do as you think right," inviting him with a movement of her hand to come closer. But hardly had he bent over her face when she, with the flat of her child's hand, hit him so hard on the back of the neck, that he gnashed his teeth loudly. The whole world heard this gnashing, it was a terrible earthquake, even the sea left its bed. Ever since the devil carries the mark of her blow on his neck, which is bruised and swollen. And so the quiet Mary fulfilled the words that were written from the day the Lord expelled Adam and Eve from the garden: 'A virgin will come who will smite your neck and crush it.'

Thus ends the story of the clever Settusibilla. The like of her will never exist again according to God's will. She had misused the Master's gifts, brought Solomon, the wise king, to a wicked end, and had incited the nations against one another. Power had not lain well in her self-willed hand, therefore the Lord and Master took it from her (4).

2. — The Wise Solomon And His Clever Sister Is-settisibilla

The wise Solomon had a sister Is-Settisibilla or Sittazbrilja (5). It often happened that the two of them teased each other with riddles. And as the clever sister always, or almost always, had the right solution, Solomon was often annoyed, and he quarrelled with her over trifles.

Once they talked about the story of Joseph, who was king in Egypt, and got to the point, when Putiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph. So Is-Settisibilla asked her brother: "What would you have done in Putiphar's place, what would have been your judgement?" Solomon said: "The appearance was against him. And he had never heard his wife utter a lie or false words. So it was right that the coat the woman held in her hand was used as evidence." Is-Settisibilla laughed at her brother and said: "You men will never see the obvious. You base your judgement on irresolute and obscure words and yet you have the temerity to continue appearing as ruler and judge. Putiphar should have judged easily and simply by the coat which his wife held in front of him. If the coat was torn in front, Joseph must have been the attacker and guilty; if the back was torn, as

(4) The narrator, a simple, sincere man, is somewhat inclined to mysticism and likes to talk in obscure allusions. He takes his explanations very seriously. Often he comes after days to correct some point 'in order that nothing is altered or misunderstood of the old words of the forbears, which tradition has passed from son to son'.

(5) In Sicilian legends Solomon's sister is called Sapienza or Stella. (Pitrè, *Fiabe e leggende sic.* 1888 p. 127, 129).

was in fact the case (I saw it myself), then she was the attacker and guilty. But the judgement of men is like an earthenware pot, that has a sound as long as it is whole and not in fragments."

And Solomon wondered at her wisdom but would not admit it, because it had again annoyed him and he only said: "Your talk is all very well, but it reminds me of an image made of soft clay, which takes shape under one's hands by chance, and one attaches no value to it. Such a likeness may turn out to be good or bad, but it does not last and is therefore worthless. Conclusions can easily be drawn in this way."

But Is-Settisibella saw through him and answered disdainfully: "If I draw you a picture of the physical appearance of Putiphar, would you be able to draw conclusions from it as to his character and habits? This is more than a clay image." Solomon did not want to appear unsure of himself and asked her for the description. Is-Settisibella only said: "It is enough for you to know that his beard and moustache were white, though the hair on his head was dark without a streak of white. What, my clever brother, do you infer from that?"

Solomon had no sure answer to this and just answered in general phrases. And he passed as a wise and really clever man. She answered him: "Those who think a lot and work with their head, will soon have white hair and become tired. Those who eat and chew a lot and use their mouth and jaw, will soon have a white beard. So you can easily judge his character."

Another time brother and sister again discussed many important things, such as other people accept without question, right or wrong. But Is-Settisibella thought nothing unnoteworthy and accepted nothing easily as truth. She had a great ability not to allow anything to become commonplace. And they talked about Eve and her relationship with the serpent. Solomon talked about what he had heard, Is-Settisibella about what she had seen. And then they quarrelled. But at last she half convinced him against his will. She explained: "Eve was a friend of the snakes. She played with these reptiles and it was they who made her want to taste sin with Adam against the will of the Master, who had given them an appointed time. And as the wicked angel knew how close she was to the serpents and how she loved them, he took their shape and tempted her again, and she learnt corruption. But Adam knew nothing about it. The Lord and Master was angry with the unclean woman and the frivolous, blind man. He ordained that both would feel unwell at fixed times according to the phases of the moon. So it remained for a long time, until the Master changed this so that only the woman suffered this affliction, because man did not know how to cover himself decently. But this happened much, much later and only after the men also had borne children, who were without exception weak and crippled, since man had to attend to his heavy work and could not take much care of himself". So Is-Settisibella talked with Solomon and spoke many a true word.

They also talked about Cain once and Solomon had his own ideas. But Is-Settisibella knew more and told him the following, in order to show whose child he was:

Eve bore twins, first a girl whose father was Adam, then a son whose father was the serpent, or the other way round, but probably it was as I

have said. And Adam had no love for Cain, he was drawn to the girl, who was very beautiful. And the Master said: "These two children are meant for each other, they shall be man and wife and they shall found a new generation." But now it happened, that Eve again gave birth to twins, this time a son they called Abel, and a daughter. Now this son was Adam's child and the girl had the same father as Cain. Eve then had many more children, but here we will mention only these four.

The children grew up and one day Abel said to his father: "I do not like my wife, I am devoted to the one who is promised to my brother. Give her to me. Cain shall be content with my wife." Adam was very surprised at this, not knowing who the father of the other two was. He was particularly fond of Abel and Cain's sister. He went to Cain and tried to take his lovely wife away from him by force, since words and threats were in vain. Now Cain became very upset and could not contain his grief and hatred. At last he said: "We will build altars and offer sacrifice. The one whose smoke rises upward shall have the beautiful wife. If the smoke from both fires rises upward, it shall remain as it was at birth — each shall have his twin sister for a wife."

Now it happened that Eve had heard this exchange and wanted to help her favourite Cain, for she loved him dearly. She hurriedly went and poured water around Abel's sacrifice so that no flame could start. The brothers knew nothing of this. They lit their pyre, but the water which had wetted everything on the outside did not allow the fire to spread. It only burnt in the centre of the pyre and behold, the smoke rose straight to the sky, while Cain's sacrifice only blazed without smoke, or only very little from the sides. Abel rejoiced and turned homewards to possess his beautiful sister, Cain's wife. But Cain ran after him and slew him. He had seen the water around Abel's pyre.

And so great grief came over Adam and Eve.