

[This is an anecdote, translated from the Persian and adapted by the present writer, from the career of perhaps the most famous of the medieval philosopher-physicians, Abu ‘Ali al-Husayn bin ‘Abullah bin Hasan bin ‘Ali bin Sina, more familiarly known in the East as Ibn Sina and in the West as Avicenna. He lived from 980 to 1037 CE. The Persian text from which the story is taken, the *Chahar Maqaleh (Four Essays)* of Nizami Aruzi, is dated 1156 CE. The story is probably apocryphal, as at least one other version attached to the biography of another famous personage in Eastern past can be found. Nevertheless, it may hold some interest and amusement for the modern reader.

The Qabus Vushmagir mentioned in the story, who reigned from 977 to 1012/13 CE, was the most distinguished of the Ziyarid dynasty that ruled in Gorgan and Tabaristan (in northern Iran) for a century and a half. His was an enlightened rule and he did indeed entertain Ibn Sina at his court.  
JRC/MN]

## **INCIDENT IN PERSIA: IBN SINA AND THE LANGUISHING PRINCE**

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When he arrived at Gorgan in northern Persia, the famous medieval philosopher and physician Ibn Sina took lodgings in a caravansarai. It happened that one of his

neighbors there was taken ill and Ibn Sina cured him. He treated another patient; the man recovered. Soon sick people started to bring him urine samples in the morning. Ibn Sina examined them and began to earn an income that increased day by day.

Then, one of the relatives of Qabus Vushmagir, the king of Gorgan, became ill. The doctors commenced their treatments and exerted themselves to the best of their abilities; but the illness did not respond to their medications. Then, one of the courtiers told Qabus, who was greatly concerned for the youth, that in a certain caravansarai a young physician had come who was very successful.

“Many have been healed by him.”

“Search him out and bring him to our sick cousin so that he may treat him and be even more successful,” commanded Qabus.

So they sought out Ibn Sina and brought him to the side of the patient. The young physician saw an extremely handsome, clean-limbed youth whose beard had begun to appear, but who was in a very miserable condition.

Ibn Sina sat down, felt his patient’s pulse, and requested a urine specimen. After examining it, he said: “I need a man who is familiar with all the quarters of Gorgan.” They brought such a man to him.

Ibn Sina placed his hand on the pulse of the patient and addressed the man just brought before him:

“Recite the names of the quarters of Gorgan.”

The man recited them until he reached a quarter whose name caused a strange jump in the sick youth’s pulse.

“Tell me the names of the districts of that quarter,” said Ibn Sina. The man recited them until he reached the name of a district which caused a repetition of the same fluttering of the pulse.

“Someone must be found,” Ibn Sina said, “who knows all the households in that district.”

They brought such a one, and he began to recite the names of the households. When he reached the name of a certain household, the same erratic fluttering recurred in the patient’s pulse.

Ibn Sina said: “Now I need someone knowing the names of every member of that household.”

They brought such a person. He started to say the names until he reached a name which caused the same reaction in the patient.

“It is completed,” Ibn Sina pronounced.

He turned to the courtiers, saying: “This youth is in love with such-and-such a girl in such-and-such a household in such-and-such a quarter. His medicine is communication with that girl; his treatment, the sight of her.”

The sick youth had ears and heard all that Lord Ibn Sina was saying. He covered his head with his bedclothes out of shame.

When the courtiers investigated the matter, they found that it was as Lord Ibn Sina had said.

This remarkable incident was brought to Qabus’s attention. Qabus was greatly astonished and commanded that Ibn Sina be brought before him. When Ibn Sina was escorted before the king, Qabus descended from his throne and came forward several paces to greet the philosopher. Qabus embraced him and seated him on a cushion set before the throne as a mark of honor.

“O most splendid scholar, most perfect philosopher, explain this course of treatment.” Qabus entreated.

“After I took his pulse and examined his urine,” Ibn Sina replied, “I became certain that the cause of his illness was passionate love, the concealment of which had brought him to this pass. If I were to have asked him outright, he

would not have answered the truth. Therefore, I grasped his pulse. When the names of the quarters were recited and his pulse change at one of them, I knew that she resided in that quarter. It was the same with the districts and households.

“Then I asked that all the names of the members of that household be cited. When he heard the name of his beloved, his pulse changed greatly. Thus, I learned her name. I told him this, and he was not able to deny it. In this way he was diagnosed.”

Qabus showed great surprise at this course of diagnosis and remained some moments in astonishment. Then he said: “O splendid and perfect scholar! The lover and the beloved are both my cousins and cousins to each other. Select the most auspicious time so that I may arrange their wedding.”

Consulting the stars, Lord Ibn Sina chose a most propitious time. The lover and his beloved were united, thus saving that handsome prince who had been so near death.

After this, Qabus honored Lord Ibn Sina greatly. Later, Ibn Sina went to Rhages and became a minister at the court of the King of Kings, Alauddauleh, as is well-known from the *History of the Times of Ibn Sina*.

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