

**SORDELLO: A  
STORY FROM  
ROBERT BROWNING**

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Sordello: A Story from Robert Browning by Frederic May Holland

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**FREDERIC MAY HOLLAND**

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# SORDELLO

A STORY FROM ROBERT BROWNING

BY

FREDERIC MAY HOLLAND  
AUTHOR OF THE "REIGN OF THE STOICS"

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## SORDELLO.

N EARLY seven hundred years ago the river Mincio formed around Mantua a great marsh, which separated the city from the low mountains covered with firs, larches, and rings of vineyard, among which stood the little castle of Goito. In that lonely fortress might have been seen a slender boy, in a loose page's dress, coming every sunset to sit beside each one, in turn, of the patient, marble girls who lay or crouched beneath a cumbrous font in one of the vaults, or watching the thievish birds at work among the grapes in autumn, or lurking, in the stormy winter evenings, beside the arras, and lifting a light with both hands to the embroidered forms of the ancestors of Eccelino da Romano, surnamed il Monaco, a Ghibelline prince whose wife, Adelaide, was mistress of Goito. Her own apartments were closed against

our hero, who was known only as the orphan child of Elcorte, an archer who, soon after the boy's birth in 1194, when the imperialists were driven out of Vicenza amid great slaughter and conflagration, had laid down his own life in saving his mistress, Adelaide, and her new-born son, afterward famous as Ecelin the Cruel.

We find Sordello wandering at will over the rest of the castle, with its dim, winding stairs and maze of corridors contrived for sin, through the ravines down which slip the streamlets singing softly, and amid the forests of maples, myrtles and evergreens, which cover the hills that look toward Mantua. His calm brow, delicate nostrils, and sharp, restless lips, show that he is

“Foremost in the regal class  
Nature has broadly severed from her mass  
Of men and framed for pleasure, as she frames  
Some happy lands that have luxurious names  
For loose fertility ; a footfall there  
Suffices to upturn to the warm air  
Half-germinating spices ; mere decay  
Produces richer life ; and day by day  
New pollen on the lily-petal grows,



And still more labyrinthine buds the rose.  
You recognize at once the finer dress  
Of flesh that amply lets in loveliness  
At eye and ear, while round the rest is furled  
(As though she would not trust them with her world)  
A veil that shows a sky not near so blue,  
And lets but half the sun look fervid through."

To all he saw that was lovely, he gave fresh life from his own soul. His ruling desire was to find something to worship, and bury himself in each external charm; for he was not one of those strong souls which develop some new form of loveliness within to match each one that is seen without. His whole life was in his fancies.

"As the adventurous spider, making light  
Of distance, shoots her threads from depth to height,  
From barbican to battlement, so flung  
Fantasies forth, and in their centre swung  
Our architect,—the breezy morning fresh  
Above, and merry,—all his waving mesh  
Laughing with lucid dew-drops rainbow-edged."

As he let his rough-hewn bow of ash sink from his aching wrist, he imagined that he had sent a golden shaft hissing through the Syrian

air to strike down some defender of Jerusalem against the crusaders. As he picked grapes and filberts, he dreamed of himself as the young emperor, Frederic the Second, quaffing wine with the Soldan, or looking at the bunch of dates which the titular King of the Holy City sent his imperial son-in-law, to remind him of his promise to reconquer Palestine. Or, again, he fancied himself Apollo, slaying the Python, and wooing Delian girls.

All these inferior idols soon cast off their borrowed crowns before a coming glory. One evening he stumbled by accident on Eccelino's daughter, Palma, who sat thenceforth conspicuous in his world of dreams, with her blue eyes, her rich red lips, and her tresses flowing in a gorgeous shower of gold, so that the ground was bright as with spilt sunbeams. The servants fired his fancy by telling him how Palma had been promised by her father to the Guelf chief, Count Richard St. Boniface, one of the Capulets of Verona, and how the Ghibelline maiden rejected his suit.

At last, as the first pink leaflets bud on the beech, and the larches brighten in the spring

sunrise, Sordello goes forth buoyantly, hoping that to-day's adventure will secure his visioned lady,

"Whose shape divine  
Quivered in the farthest rainbow-vapor, glanced  
Athwart the flying herons."

On he goes through the brakes of withered fern and over the great morass, shot through and through with flashing waters, each foot-fall sending up a diamond jet. Still Palma seems floating on before him, and he thinks that when he has passed the next wood he will hear her confess her love.

He clears the last screen of pine trees before Mantua, and there, under the walls, amid a gay crowd of men and women, sits his lady, enthroned as Queen of the Court of Love, at which the troubadour, Eglamor, contends for her prize against all comers. The famous minstrel sings of Apollo, but before the people's frank applause is half done, Sordello has begun the true lay with the true end. On flies the song in a giddy race after the flying story, word making word leap forth, and rhyme, rhyme.