

Book 1 Canto 1

*The patron of true holiness,
foul Error does defeat;
Hypocrisy him to entrap,
does to his home entreat.*

1

*Dressed in the 'full armour of God', our champion,
Redcross, rides across the land. Both man and horse are
ready for action. Redcross symbolizes England.*

A GENTLE knight was riding 'cross the plain,
clad in strong armour, with a silver shield
in which old dents of deep wounds did remain,
the cruel marks of many a bloody field,
yet not till then this armour did he wield.
His angry steed did fight its foaming bit,
and showed it would not to this restraint yield.
The knight looked courageous, and well did sit,
like one for knightly jousts and fierce encounters fit.

2

*A red cross is emblazoned both on his chest and on his
silver shield of faith.*

But on his chest a blood-red cross he bore,
in fond remembrance of his dying Lord,
for whose sweet sake that glorious badge he wore,
whom dead and living always would adore;
the same symbol upon his shield was scored.
For higher help he was forever glad;
loyal and true he was in deed and word,
but in his face, his look was far too sad.
He feared nothing; others feared everything he had.

3

*He is on a mission of honour for the Queen of the
Fairies, anxious to prove himself.*

Upon a great adventure he was bound
that greatest Gloriana to him gave,
that greatest glorious Queen of Faeries found

to win him honour, and her grace to have,
which of all earthly things he most did crave.
And always as he rode, his heart did yearn
to prove his strength in battle brave
against his enemy, his strength to learn;
against his enemy: a dragon, fierce and stern.

4

Riding alongside him is a modestly dressed lady on a white donkey leading a white lamb, the essence of humility. We later discover that her name is Una. She symbolizes both Truth and the True Church.

A lovely lady rode along his side,
on a humble donkey whiter than snow,
she even whiter, but her face did hide
under a veil whose folds reached very low,
which she then covered with a big black throw,
as though in mourning still: she looked so sad,
and sat heavy as her mount sauntered slow.
It seemed her heart some hidden care it had,
while behind on a leash, a milk-white lamb did pad.

5

Una comes from a royal family with an empire stretching from east to west that evil has invaded. She wants Redcross to avenge her family and her country.

Her purity and innocence in sum,
like that fair lamb, she was in life and lore
and by descent from royal lineage come
from ancient kings and queens, that had of yore
their scepters stretched from east to western shore,
and all the world in their allegiance held.
Then a foul fiend had caused an ugly war,
laid waste to all their land and them expelled
whom, to avenge, she fetched the knight she now beheld.

6

Lagging behind Una is her dwarf servant. While they ride along, a great storm breaks out.

And far away, a dwarf behind did lag
as was his habit, always being last
or exhausted from carrying her bag

of supplies on his back. As the day passed,
the sky started to become overcast,
and angry *Jove* a frightening storm of rain
did pour into Mother Earth's lap so fast
that every creature could not dry remain,
and this fair couple, too, sought shelter to attain.

7

The group seeks shelter in a densely wooded grove nearby.

Forced then to seek some cover close at hand,
a shady grove not far away they spied
that promised help the tempest to withstand.
Its lofty trees were clad with summer's pride
and spread so broad, they heaven's light did hide,
too thick to penetrate by any star.
Within the grove were paths and alleys wide,
well worn by feet, and leading inward far:
'tseemed a good port to them, so in they entered are.

8

They enjoy the songs of the birds that have found a haven there. The grove also contains many species of trees.

As they go on, forward by pleasure led,
happy to hear the birds' sweet harmony,
protected therein from the tempest dread,
their song seeming to scorn the cruel sky.
They sang in praise of trees grown straight and high:
the lofty pine; the cedar proud and tall;
the vine-clad elm; the poplar never dry;
the trusty oak (the king of forests all);
the aspen for barrels; the cypress funeral;

9

The list of trees in the mysterious grove continues.

The laurel, crown of mighty conquerors
and poets wise; the fir that's shedding still;
the willow, worn by heartbroken lovers;
the yew, compliant to the benders' will;
the birch for shafts; bush willow for the mill;
the myrrh that bleeds sweetly from bitter wound;

the hostile beech; the ash for nothing ill;
the rich olive; and the sycamore round;
bright holly; and the maple with the hollow sound.

10

The storm lets up, but the group cannot find its way out of the grove.

Led with delight, they're charmed along the way,
until the blust'ring storm has overblown;
hoping to find the spot where they did stray,
they cannot see the path they first were shown,
and wander back and forth on paths unknown;
they travel far away from where they've been,
and think their sanity is not their own.
So many paths, so many turns they've seen
that which to take, they've in a growing quandary been.

11

They come to a cave in the thickest part of the woods.

At last, resolving forward still to go,
to finding themselves either in or out,
they'd take the path that did the most wear show,
the labyrinth's most likely exit route.
They tracked far down the path and then did scout
that it had brought them to a hollow cave
amidst the thickest woods. The Champion stout
quickly dismounted from his stallion brave,
and to the Dwarf a while his useless spear he gave.

12

Una warns Redcross to stay on his guard.

"Be on your guard," then said the lady mild,
"or trouble may you suddenly provoke:
the danger's hid, the place remote and wild
and breeds great fears; fire often shows no smoke
while hazards lurk below. Withhold your stroke,
Sir Knight, therefore, 'til you more tests have made."
"Twould lady," said he, "be shame to revoke
our further progress 'cause of hidden shade.
Virtue is its own light, through darkness for to wade."

Una recognizes the cave as the den of the monster, Error, and pleads with Redcross not to go in, echoed by the dwarf.

“Yes, but,” said she, “the hazards of this place
 I know better than you; it’s now too late
 to wish you back, though you’d think it disgrace;
 yet wisdom warns, while your foot’s in the gate,
 to stop before another makes you wait.
 This is the *Wand’ring Wood*, this *Error’s den*,
 a vile monster that God and man both hate:
 that’s why I say, ‘Beware.’” “Run, run,” said then
 the fearful Dwarf: “This is no place for living men.”

Redcross goes in anyways. He can just see the outline of the monster. It is half snake and half woman.

But his fire and valour both needed vent,
 so the young knight for nothing would be stayed,
 and on toward the deep, dark hole he went;
 when he looked in, his glistening armour made
 a bit of light fall in, only a shade,
 enough to make the monster stand out plain:
 a half-snake creature horribly displayed,
 the other half did woman’s shape retain,
 the whole quite loathsome, filthy, foul, full of disdain.

The monster has a long tail tipped by a deadly barb and has given birth to a thousand offspring. These all scurry into her mouth when the light in the den changes.

And as she lay upon the dirty ground,
 her great long tail through her den wide outspread,
 twisted in knots and many coils around,
 tipped by a deadly sting. She there had bred
 a thousand offspring which she daily fed,
 sucking upon her pois’nous teats, each one
 a different shape, yet all disfigurèd.
 Soon as that abrupt light upon them shone,
 they crept into her mouth, and then they all were gone.

The monster recoils into the darkness of the den.

Their startled dam, aroused and now afraid,
 rushed from her den, hurling her hid'eous tail
 around her accursed head, whose folds displayed
 were now uncoiled, stretched out so it could flail.
 When she looked 'round, and saw him in his mail,
 fully armèd, she tried to turn again.
 It seemed the hateful light would her impale,
 wanting always in darkness to remain,
 where no one could see her, and she'd from them refrain.

*Redcross jumps on the monster, sword in hand,
 preventing her from turning. He brings the sword down
 onto her head, but it glances off onto her shoulder.*

Which, when the valiant Elf perceived, he leapt
 like a lion upon the flying prey,
 and with his sharp blade, he her boldly kept
 from turning back, and forcèd her to stay.
 Enraged, she then loudly began to bray,
 turning fiercely, her speckled tail advanced,
 threatening her angry sting, him to dismay,
 which he'd now wield his fearless sword against.
 The stroke down from her head onto her shoulder glanced.

*Stunned for a moment, the monster becomes enraged
 and manages to turn, wrapping her tail around
 Redcross.*

Overcome by that blow, her senses dazed,
 her rage kindled, she gathered herself round,
 and all at once her beastly body raised
 with redoubled strength high above the ground.
 Then wrapping her twisted body around,
 leapt fiercely on his shield, and her huge tail
 all suddenly around his body wound.
 Hand and foot he tried in vain to avail;
 God help the man so wrapped in *Error's* endless tail.

Una shouts out, urging Redcross to use all his strength to defeat the monster. He manages to free one hand, with which he grips the monster's throat and chokes it.

His lady, saddened by his dire complaint,
cried out, "Now, now, Sir Knight, here's what to do,
add faith onto your force, and do not faint.
Then strangle her, or she will strangle you."
When he heard that, with great ferocity,
his gall pumping out bile with huge disdain,
and gath'ring all his strength, got one hand free,
with which he gripped her throat, causing such pain
that she soon loosened the coils that did him constrain.

The monster's reaction is to vomit the contents out of her stomach into the den.

With that she spat out of her filthy maw
a flood of poison horrible and black,
full of great lumps of flesh and fragments raw,
which stank so vile, that it forced him to slack
his mighty grip, and from her turn his back.
Her vomit full of books and pamphlets was,
with loathsome frogs and toads which eyes did lack,
who then crept away in the weedy grass;
her filthy vomit all the place defiled has.

The poet compares the creatures coming out of the monster's stream of vomit to the annual flooding of the Nile.

Just as old Father Nile begins to swell
with yearly pride above *th'Egyptian* vale,
his thick waves do their fertile slime upwell,
and overflow each prairie and low dale.
But when his later spring starts to subside,
huge heaps of mud he leaves, wherein there breed
thousands of new creatures left from his tide,
part male and part female from his rich seed;
such ugly monstrous shapes could nowhere else succeed.

22

Redcross gags on the stench while the monster continues to spew out her stinking offspring which press all around him but are unable to harm him.

The same did so much aggravate the knight,
 who almost choked up from the deadly stink.
 His strength failed him; he could no longer fight.
 When his enemy saw his courage shrink,
 she threw up out of her dark hellish sink,
 her teeming cursèd spawn of serpents small,
 misshapen monsters, foul and black as ink,
 which swarming all around his legs did crawl,
 and him weighed down a lot, but could not hurt at all.

23

The poet compares Redcross to a shepherd brushing off annoying insects.

Like the gentle shepherd at eventide,
 when the red sun starts fading in the west,
 looks down o'er his flock on the mountainside,
 and notes which munch down their green supper best.
 A cloud of mosquitoes does him molest,
 all trying to stab him with feeble stings,
 their annoyance leaves him nowhere to rest;
 but with his rustic hands their tender wings
 he often brushes, often mars, their murmurings.

24

Having resolved to win against the monster, Redcross summons up all his strength and cuts off the monster's head with a single stroke.

Not well positioned, more afraid of shame
 than of the certain danger he stood in,
 half furious up to his foe he came,
 resolved in mind abruptly all to win
 or lose at once before he would give in.
 He struck her then with more than manly force,
 and from her body full of filthy sin
 he cut her hateful head without remorse;
 the coal-black blood gushed from her body's headless source.

25

The scattered offspring misunderstand what has happened to their mother and gather around her body to drink their mother's blood as if it were her milk.

Her scattered brood, soon as their parent dear
they saw, so roughly falling to the ground,
groaning while dying, all trembled with fear,
gathered themselves around her body round,
thinking their usual entrance to have found
at her wide mouth: but they'd misunderstood
and flocked instead around her gaping wound,
where they sucked up their dying mother's blood,
making her death their life, and so her hurt their good.

26

After the offspring have gorged themselves on their mother's blood, their bellies burst and they all die.

That vile and loathsome sight him much amazed,
to see th'ungrateful offspring, heaven-cursed,
devour their dam; and while on them he gazed,
having just satisfied their bloody thirst,
he saw them with their swollen bellies burst,
their bowels gushing out: a fitting end
for those who drank her life which they had nursed.
No more need he on them his time to spend;
his foes had slain themselves, no more would they contend.

27

Lady Una praises Redcross for his actions and prays for his future success.

His lady watched these events from afar,
approached in haste to greet his victory
and said, "Great Knight, born under happy star,
you see your vanquished foe before you lie:
you are worthy to wear that armoury,
in which you have won great glory today,
and proved your strength on a strong enemy.
Your first adventure: many such I pray,
and wish from now on, that they always succeed may."

The group remounts and finds its way out of the woods this time.

Then mounted he upon his horse again,
 and with the lady then retraced their steps;
 the path they used was beaten down most plain,
 and did not veer or to a by-way bend,
 but could be followed right unto the end,
 the which, at last, out of the wood them brought.
 So forward on his way (with God as friend)
 he went ahead, and new adventures sought;
 he had to travel far, before the next he got.

They meet an old gray-bearded man along the way, dressed in black and with a book hanging from his belt.

After a while, they met upon the way
 an old man who in long black clothes was clad;
 his feet were bare, his beard all silver gray,
 and from his belt his book he hanging had.
 He seemed sober and quite solemnly sad,
 and to the ground his eyes were humbly bent,
 simple in show, empty of malice bad;
 all the way along, he prayed as he went,
 and often smote his breast, like one who did repent.

Redcross asks him to direct them on the path towards new adventures, but the old man protests that he spends his day in prayer in an out-of-the-way place and that he doesn't hear much of happenings abroad.

He saluted the knight well, bowing low,
 who well responded, as that cour'teous was,
 and after he asked him, if he did know
 of strange adventures, which elsewhere did pass.
 "Ah, my dear son," said he, "how can, alas,
 a simple man, who lives in hidden cell,
 praying his beads all day for his trespass,
 news of the war and worldly trouble tell?
 With the holy father such things do not sit well.

However, the old man says he can pass on some gossip about a local evil-doer. Redcross accepts the offer with enthusiasm.

“But if of danger that does nearby dwell,
 and if it’s home-grown evil you would hear,
 of a strange man I can you gossip tell,
 who’s wasted all this country far and near.”
 “That’s what,” said he, “I have come to inquire,
 and will reward you well to see the place,
 whereto that wicked man does now retire;
 for to all knights, it is a foul disgrace.
 That such a monster lives so long, I cannot face.”

The old man points out the direction in which the evil-doer lives, but Una observes that Redcross needs rest to restore his strength now that it is becoming night.

“That way,” said he, “deep in the wilderness,
 that’s where he lives, and where none other might
 ever go without suffering great distress.”
 “Now,” said the lady, “it’s becoming night,
 and well I note that from your recent fight
 you have been tired out: so to stay strong,
 you will need rest if you’d restore your might.
 The sun that crosses heaven all day long,
 at night does treat his steeds the ocean waves among.

The old man offers to put them up for the night, and Red Cross readily accepts.

“So, like the sun, sir, take your timely rest,
 and with new day, new work at once begin;
 untroubled sleep, they say, gives counsel best.”
 You very well, Sir Knight, have advised been,”
 said then the aged man. “The way to win
 is wisely to advise: the day is spent;
 it would be best for me to take you in
 this self-same night.” The knight was quite content:
 so to the home of that holy father they went.

34

The old man lives in a small, remote hermitage with its own chapel. An artesian well is the source of a crystal-clear stream.

A humble little hermitage it was,
down in a dale, close by the forest's side,
far from the eyes of people who did pass
in travel to and fro: and just inside,
a holy chapel had been edified,
in which the hermit went his prayers to say,
the rituals of morn and eventide.
Nearby, a crystal stream did gently play,
which from a sacred spring welled up and flowed each day.

35

They pass the evening in warm conversation, lulled by the apparent sanctity of their host.

When they arrived, the little house did fill,
and as for entertainment, there none was:
rest was their feast, and they indulged their will.
A noble mind most satisfaction has;
with good warm talk the evening so they pass,
for that old man had pleasant words in store,
and could well file his tongue as smooth as glass.
He talked of saints and popes, and, even more,
he threw ave marias after and before.

36

The guests go to bed and soon fall asleep. Their host, however, looks up spells with which he can disturb their sleep.

The falling night thus came upon them fast,
and heavy sleep weighed down drooping eyelids
as *Morpheus's* envoy on them cast
sweet slumb'ring dew, the which to sleep them bids.
Unto their beds his guests he gently winds;
when all have fallen fast asleep he finds,
he to his study goes, and there amidst
his magic books and arts of var'ious kinds,
he looks for potent charms to trouble sleepy minds.

*He finds what he is looking for, curses God and invokes
the help of Satan.*

Then selecting some words most horrible,
 (don't read them, please!) therefrom did verses frame,
 with which and other spells as terrible,
 he conjured up the gods of sleep, who came.
 He then cursed heaven and spoke disgraceful shame
 of highest God, the Lord of life and light:
 a bold, bad man who dared to call by name
 the evil prince of darkness and dead night,
 quaking the streams of hell and putting them to flight.

*He calls up clouds of sprites ready to do his bidding. He
chooses two of them, one to act as a messenger and the
other to work with him there.*

He then called out of the deep darkness dread,
 legions of sprites, the which like little flies
 flutt'ring around his ever-damnèd head,
 waiting to where their service he applies,
 to help his friends or scare his enemies.
 From them, he chose but two, the falsest, too,
 and best for making up true-seeming lies.
 The one of them, he gave a message to;
 the other stayed with him for other work to do.

*The messenger sprite flies to the house of Morpheus
situated deep in the earth.*

He quickly made his way through the wide air,
 and through the world of waters wide and deep,
 so to the house of Morpheus did tear.
 Within the bowels of the earth down steep
 and low, where dawning day does never peep,
 his dwelling is; there *Ocean* his wet bed
 does ever wash, and *Moon* does always steep
 in silver dew his ever-drooping head,
 while over him sad *Night* her black mantle does spread.

40

The messenger sprite finds the gates to Morpheus's abode locked and guarded by dogs.

He finds the double gates locked and shut fast:
one is all framed in polished ivory,
the other is with silver overcast.
And far in front of them alert dogs lie,
watching to banish *Care*, their enemy,
who often tries to trouble gentle sleep.
Past them, the sprite does go by quietly,
and up to *Morpheus* comes, whom he in deep
drowsiness finds: he nothing hears while he's asleep.

41

The faint sounds of a trickling stream, the buzzing of bees and the drizzle of rain are all that can be heard.

What's more, to lull him in his slumber soft,
a trickling stream from high rocks tumbles down,
and ever-drizzling rain upon the loft,
mixed with a murm'ring wind, much like the soun'
of swarming bees, did put him in a swoon.
No other noise, not people's troubling cries
that might bother even a stone-walled town,
could there be heard: but careless *Quiet* lies
wrapped in eternal silence, far from enemies.

42

Having quietly flown past the dogs without disturbing them, the messenger sprite approaches Morpheus and tries to speak with him, in vain. Even more violent shaking only rouses him to a drowsy state.

The messenger approached him then and spake,
but his words wasted were: he spoke in vain.
He slept so sound, that nothing would him wake.
Then more abrupt, he pushed to create pain,
but he would only stretch; then he again
shook him so hard, that he was forced to speak.
Like someone in a dream, whose waking brain
is tossed with images and urgings weak,
he mumbled soft, but would not all his silence break.

Only when Morpheus hears the name of Hecaté does he come to. Now the sprite is able to give him the request from his master for the appropriate kind of false dream to misguide his sleeping guests.

The sprite began more boldly him to wake,
 and threatened him with that most dreaded name
 of *Hecaté*, and that did make him quake.
 Then lifting up his heavy head, with blame
 half angrily asked him, for what he came.
 "I was," he said, "by the *Magician* sent –
 he who the stubborn sprites can wisely tame.
 He asks you to send him for his intent,
 a fit false dream that will mislead his sleepers sent.

Morpheus calls up the requested dream and falls back to sleep. The sprite flies back to his master.

The god obeyed and called up straight away,
 a strange dream from within his prison dark,
 delivered it to him, and down did lay
 his heavy head, emptied of any spark,
 whose senses then became both numbed and stark.
 The sprite went back through the ivory door,
 flew up and out as cheerful as a lark;
 and on his little wings, the dream he bore
 in haste to his master, where he'd left him before.

In the meantime, the magician has fashioned the other sprite into a beautiful young maiden resembling Una.

He all this time, with charms and secret arts,
 had made a lady of that other sprite;
 he made of liquid air her tender parts
 so lifelike and so true in all men's sight,
 it weaker spirits could have ravished quite.
 The maker, too, for all his clever wit,
 was also beguiled by this stunning sight;
 he clad her all in white, and over it
 threw a black stole that would have been for *Una* fit.

46

Redcross now dreams the false dream that Morpheus had made for him, while the false Una settles into bed with him.

Now when that baseless dream was to him brought,
unto that Elfin knight he had him fly,
where he slept soundly without evil thought,
and in his mind made up a fantasy
as his master had taught him privately.
Now the new creature born false through-and-through,
full of the maker's guile, and just as sly,
was taught to imitate the lady true,
with whose resemblance would the sprite her knight imbue.

47

Redcross has the erotic dreams intended for him, although the dreams cause him some doubt.

Thus well instructed, to their work they haste,
and coming where the knight in slumber lay,
the one upon his well-built head him placed,
and made him dream of love and lusty play
that near melted his manly heart away,
drowning in reckless bliss and wicked joy.
It seemed to him his lady by him lay,
and to him moaned how some false flying boy
had her chaste heart subdued, and made of her a toy.

48

Red Cross's dreams anticipate his misgivings and reinforce the false notions about the sprite lying beside him.

And the reigning queen of beauty perfect,
fair *Venus*, seemed unto his bed to bring
her, whom he waking always did expect
to be the purest flower that e'er did spring
from earthly soil, the daughter of a king,
now a loose woman, to vile service bound.
And yet, all the *Three Graces* seemed to sing
"Most womanly woman!" and dancing round,
while freshest *Spring* her with an ivy garland crowned.

Redcross wakes up, seeing what he thinks is Una offering herself up to him.

In this great passion of unu'sual lust
 or u'sual fear of doing things amiss,
 he was startled, as if he did mistrust
 some secret thought or hidden enemies.
 But there before his face, his lady is,
 under black cloak hiding her baited hook,
 and when, half blushing offered him to kiss,
 with gentle coaxing and a lovely look,
 just like that virgin true, which for her knight him took.

Redcross realizes he has been duped and is about to kill the sprite, but has second thoughts.

He was dismayed to see so foul a sight,
 and became enraged at her bold disguise.
 He was sore tempted her to slay outright;
 but he cooled his temper with patience wise,
 and stayed his hand, began himself t'advise
 to prove his instinct and her phony truth.
 She wrung her hands to show she spoke no lies,
 and cried to stir up pity, not untruth,
 both for her noble blood, and for her tender youth,

The false Una throws herself onto the mercy of Redcross.

And said, "Ah Sir, my true lord and my love,
 shall I accuse the secret cruelty of Fate,
 and potent causes crafted in heaven above,
 or God, who's blind, and makes me agitate
 to find true love instead of certain hate?
 Yet thus he forces me to do or die.
 Death is my due: so rue my wretched state,
 you, whom my hard avenging destiny
 has made judge of my life and death so casually.

The false Una declares that she has loved Redcross since she was a child.

“’Twas for you that I first was forced to leave
 my father’s kingdom.” (Here she stopped for tears,
 her voice her swollen heart seemed to bereave.)
 And then she carried on: “In earlier years,
 I was captive to money and my fears:
 to you I go for comfort and sure aid:
 don’t leave me stranded here in all my tears.”
 “Why ma’am,” said he, “what makes you so dismayed?
 What frightens you, that you would not have me afraid?”

Redcross suspects her words but cannot prove that she is lying.

“My love for you,” she said, “and fear of shame
 keeps me awake, and wastes the worn-out night
 with silent suffering and endless blame,
 while deep in guiltless sleep you have no fright.”
 Her servile words made the respected knight
 suspect her truth; but since he no lies knew,
 her flattery and condescending spite
 he would not judge, but said, “Lady, I rue
 that for my sake such unknown grief within you grew.

Redcross allows himself to be flattered by her declarations of love as she gently tries to lull him back to sleep.

“For sure, all did not fall on stony ground:
 nothing in life is so dear to my heart,
 as is your love, and so, I’m to you bound.
 Do not let idle fears cause you to smart
 when there’s no cause; now to your rest depart.”
 Not quite convinced, yet she began to cease
 her sorrowful complaints, and used her art
 to feed him words that only could him please,
 then gently turned away, as though taking her ease.

Exhausted, Redcross finally falls asleep, but is again vexed by more erotic dreams similar to those he had dreamed before.

Long after, he lay wond'ring at her mood,
bothered the lady's regard was so slight,
for whose defence he would have shed his blood.
At last, exhausted from his prev'ious fight,
and having rocked asleep the harmful sprite,
the troubling dream again stirred up his brain,
with bow'rs and beds and ladies' great delight.
But when he saw his work had been in vain,
to that disfigured sprite he came back once again.

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