

The Cave of Mammon

From the 'Faery Queene'

By Edmund Spenser

“Come thou,” quoth he, “and see.” So by-and-by
Through that thick covert he him led, and found
A darksome way which no man could descry,
That deep descended through the hollow ground,
And was with dread and horror compassed around.

At length they came into a larger space,
That stretched itself unto an ample plain,
Through which a beaten broad highway did trace,
That straight did lead to Pluto’s griesly reign:
By that way’s side there sate infernal Pain,
And fast beside him sate tumultuous Strife;
The one in hand an iron whip did strain,
The other brandished a bloody knife;
And both did gnash their teeth, and both did threaten life.

On th’ other side in one consort there sate
Cruel Revenge, and rancorous Despite,
Disloyal Treason, and heart-burning Hate;
But gnawing Jealousy, out of their sight
Sitting alone, his bitter lips did bite;
And trembling Fear still to and fro did fly,
And found no place where safe he shroud him might;
Lamenting Sorrow did in darkness lie;
And Shame his ugly face did hide from living eye.

And over then sad Horror with grim hue
Did always soar, beating his iron wings;
And after him owls and night-ravens flew,
The hateful messengers of heavy things,
Of death and dolour telling sad tidings:
Whiles sad Celeno, sitting on a clift,
A song of bale and bitter sorrow sings,
That heart of flint asunder could have rift;
Which having ended, after him she flieth swift.

All these before the gates of Pluto lay;
By whom they passing spake unto them nought.
But th’ Elfin knight with wonder all the way
Did feed his eyes, and fill’d his inner thought.

At last him to a little door he brought,
That to the gate of hell, which gaped wide,
Was next adjoining, ne them parted ought;
Betwixt them both was but a little stride,
That did the House of Riches from Hell-mouth divide.

Before the door sate self-consuming Care,
Day and night keeping wary watch and ward,
For fear lest Force or Fraud should unaware
Break in, and spoil the treasure there in guard:
Ne would he suffer Sleep once thither-ward
Approach, albe his drowsy den were next;
For next to Death is Sleep to be compared,
Therefore his house is unto his annex:
Here Sheep, there Riches, and Hell-gate them both betwixt.

So soon as Mammon there arrived, the door
To him did open and afforded way:
Him follow'd eke Sir Guyon evermore;
Ne darkness him ne danger might dismay.
Soon as he ent'red was, the door straightway
Did shut, and from behind it forth there leapt
An ugly fiend, more foul than dismal day;
The which with monstrous stalk behind him stept,
And ever as he went due watch upon him kept.

Well hopèd he, ere long that hardy guest,
If ever covetous hand or lustful eye
Or lips he laid on thing that liked him best,
Or ever sleep his eye-strings did untie,
Should be his prey; and therefore still on high
He over him did hold his cruel claws,
Threat'ning with greedy gripe to do him die,
And rend in pieces with his ravenous paws,
If ever he transgress'd the fatal Stygian laws.

That house's form within was rude and strong,
Like an huge cave hewn out of rocky clift,
From whose rough vault the ragged breaches hung
Emboist with massy gold of glorious gift;
And with rich metal loaded every rift,
That heavy ruin they did seem to threat;
And over them Arachne high did lift
Her cunning web, and spread her subtle net,
Enwrapped in foul smoke and clouds more black than jet.

Both roof and floor and walls were all of gold,
But overgrown with dust and old decay,
And hid in darkness, that none could behold
The hue thereof; for view of cheerful day
Did never in that house itself display,
But a faint shadow of uncertain light:
Such as a lamp, whose life does fade away;
Or as the moon, clothèd with cloudy night,
Does show to him that walks in fear and sad affright.

In all that room was nothing to be seen
But huge great iron chests, and coffers strong,
All barr'd with double bands, that none could wed
Them to enforce by violence or wrong;
On every side they placed were along.
But all the ground with skulls was scatterèd
And dead men's bones, which round about were flung;
Whose lives, it seemed, whylome there were shed,
And their vile carcasses now left unburied.

They forward pass; ne Guyon yet spoke word
Till that they came unto an iron door,
Which to them openèd of his own accord,
And show'd of riches such exceeding store
As eye of man did never see before,
Ne ever could within one place be found,
Though all the wealth which is or was of yore
Could gather'd be through all the world around,
And that above were added to that under ground.

The charge thereof unto a covetous spright
Commanded was, who thereby did attend,
And warily awaited day and night,
From other covetous fiends it to defend,
Who it to rob and ransack did intend.
Then Mammon, turning to that warrior, said:—
“Lo, here the worldès bliss! lo, here the end
To which all men do aim, rich to be made!
Such grace now to be happy is before thee laid.”

“Certes,” said he, “I n'ill thine off'red grace,
Ne to be made so happy do intend!
Another bliss before mine eyes I place,
Another happiness, another end.
To them that list, these base regards I lend;
But I in arms, and in achievements brave,

Do rather choose my fleeting hours to spend,
And to be lord of those that riches have,
Than them to have myself, and be their servile slave.”

Thereat the fiend his gnashing teeth did grate,
And grieved, so long to lack his greedy prey:
For well he weened that so glorious bait
Would tempt his guest to take thereof assay;
Had he so done, he had him snatch'd away
More light than culver in the falcon's fist:
Eternal God thee save from such decay!
But whenas Mammon saw his purpose miss'd,
Him to entrap unwares another way he wist.

Thence, forward he him led, and shortly brought
Unto another room, whose door forthright
To him did open as it had been taught;
Therein an hundred ranges weren pight,
And hundred furnaces all burning bright:
By every furnace many fiends did bide,—
Deformèd creatures, horrible in sight;
And every fiend his busy pains applied
To melt the golden metal, ready to be tried.

One with great bellows gather'd filling air,
And with forced wind the fuel did inflame;
Another did the dying brands repair
With iron tongs, and sprinkled of the same
With liquid waves, fierce Vulcan's rage to tame,
Who, mastring them, renew'd his former heat;
Some scumm'd the dross that from the metal came;
Some stirr'd the molten ore with ladles great;
And every one did swinck, and every one did sweat.

But when an earthly wight they present saw
Glist'ring in arms and battailous array,
From their hot work they did themselves withdraw
To wonder at the sight; for till that day,
They never creature saw that came that way:
Their staring eyes, sparkling with fervent fire
And ugly shapes, did nigh the Man dismay,
That, were it not for shame, he would retire;
Till that him thus hespake their sovereign lord and sire:—

“Behold, thou Faerys son, with mortal eve
That living eye before did never see!

The thing that thou didst crave so earnestly,
To weet whence all the wealth late show'd by me
Proceeded, lo! now us reveal'd to thee.
Here is the fountain of the world's good!
Now therefore if thou wilt enriched be,
Advise thee well, and change thy willful mood;
Lest thou perhaps hereafter wish, and be withstood."

Suffice it then, thou money-god," quoth he,
"That all thine idle offers I refuse.
All that I need I have: what needeth me
To covet more than I have cause to use?
With such vain shows thy wordlings vile abuse;
But give me leave to follow mine emprise."
Mammon was much displeas'd, yet note he chose
But bear the rigor of his bold mesprise:
And thence him forward led, him further to entice.