Canto 1: Two main characters are described:
- The Knight (often referred to as RedCrosse or the Red Cross Knight—later will be revealed to be St. George)
- The Lady (whose name is later revealed to be Una, “One”—with her Dwarf behind

Rain storm. RCK and Una seek shelter in the woods, get lost, and wind up at cave of Error. RCK fights and kills Error.

RCK and Una meet an old hermit (later named Archimago, perhaps = “arch-magician” or “arch-imagemaker”) and go to his house to spend the night. Archimago calls up spirits, sends one to fetch a false dream and turns another into a false Una.

RCK has an erotic dream about Una, wakes up to find the false Una in his room, saying that she loves him.

Canto 2: In the morning Archimago shows RCK the false Una having sex. Believing Una to be “loose,” RCK leaves in disgust, taking the Dwarf with him.

Una wakes up, finds herself deserted, and goes after RCK.

Archimago disguises himself as RCK and goes after Una.

We follow RCK’s adventures for a while: RCK meets Sans foy (= “without faith”), fights and kills him. Takes his shield and the woman he was with, who calls herself Fidessa (= “Faith” or “faithful”).

They stop to rest. RCK plucks a branch from a tree, which begins to speak—it’s a man who has been turned into a tree. Fradubio (= “Brother Doubt”) tells his story:

He loved a woman named Fraelissa (= “Weakness”). Then he fought and killed a knight and takes the woman he was with, Duessa (= “two” or “double”). Duessa uses magic to make Fraelissa seem hideously ugly, and Fradubio abandons Fraelissa for Duessa. Then he catches a glimpse of Duessa’s true nature, a hideous monster, and decides to leave her. Before he can, Duessa turns him into a tree (as she has already done to Fraelissa).

The narrator tells us that Fidessa is really Duessa.
Canto 3: Now we follow Una for a while.
A lion appears as if to attack Una, but stops, begins to follow and protect her.

She meets a woman (Abessa, non-existence, maybe suggesting “Abbey” or “Abbot”), and her blind mother Corceca (= “Blind Heart”). They don’t welcome her, but allow her to stay there for the night because they are afraid of the lion. Abessa’s lover Kirkrapine (= “Church-pillager”) arrives and is killed by the lion.

In the morning Una leaves. Abessa and Corceca follow her, cursing her for Kirkrapine’s death. They meet Archimago, looking for Una.

Archimago (still disguised as RCK) catches up to Una. She is mistakenly overjoyed to be reunited with RCK.

They encounter Sans joy (“Without law”), who attacks Archimago, thinking Archimago killed Sans joy’s brother Sans foy.

Sans joy fights Archimago, knocks him down, and takes Archimago’s helmet off to kill him, thereby revealing him to be Archimago. Sans joy greets him as a friend and Una is dismayed.

Sans joy kills the lion and carries Una off.

Canto 4: We go back to RCK for a while.
Duessa (still as Fidessa) and RCK come to a palace (later to be called the House of Pride), ruled by Lucifera, whose Counselors are six of the seven deadly sins.

Sans joy arrives and challenges RCK to fight, to avenge the death of Sans foy.

The night before the fight, Duessa sneaks off to see Sans joy and declares her loyalty to him.

Canto 5: RCK and Sans joy fight.
Just as RCK is about to finish off Sans joy, a dark cloud covers Sans joy.

Duessa goes to visit Night and persuades her to help take Sans joy to Hades to be restored to life by Aesculapius.

The Dwarf discovers the dungeon and warns RCK. They quickly sneak out the back way.
Canto 6: Back to **Una**: Una is saved from rape when a group of satyrs appear and scare off Sans loy.

The satyrs worship Una. She tries to “teach them truth,” but they don’t understand.

Sir **Satyrane** (son of a woman and a satyr). He becomes Una’s companion and helps her continue to look for RCK.

They meet a pilgrim (Archimago in disguise), who says that Sans loy killed RCK. Satyrane fights Sans loy. The canto ends before the battle is over.

Canto 7: Back to **RCK**. Duessa returns to House of Pride to find RCK gone, and goes out after him.

She finds him resting, disarmed, by a fountain. They “bathe in pleasaunce of the joyous shade” and RCK drinks from the fountain, which has been cursed by Diana because the nymph of the fountain rested during a hunt. The water will make whoever drinks it weak.

The giant **Orgoglio** (= “Pride”) appears and knocks RCK out. At Duessa’s request, he doesn’t kill RCK but takes him prisoner. The Dwarf runs off to find Una and tell her what has happened.

A knight appears (called **Arthur** in the argument). Una tells him her story. Arthur promises to rescue RCK. They go off, with the Dwarf leading.

Canto 8: Arthur and his Squire fight Orgoglio and the beast, defeating them.

They enter the dungeon, guarded by **Ignaro**, and free all the prisoners, including RCK, now weak and thin.

They disrobe Duessa and reveal her true ugliness.

Canto 9: Arthur tells his story:

He doesn’t know who his parents are. He was taken away at birth, given to a Faery knight and educated by **Timon** and **Merlin**.

He had a dream about the **Faery Queene**, has loved her and sought her ever since.
They part to continue their quests, but RCK needs to recover from his ordeal.

RCK and Una encounter a knight (later named Trevisan) running away from some danger. He tells his story:

> With his friend Terwin, encountered Despair, who talks Terwin into killing himself.

RCK goes to avenge Terwin, but is nearly persuaded to kill himself, until Una stops him.

Canto 10: Una takes RCK to the House of Holiness, governed by Caelia (“Heaven”).

He is taught by Fidelia (“Faithful”) and Speranza (“Hope”), cured by Patience, and further taught by Charissa (“Charity”) and Mercie. Contemplation shows RCK the New Jerusalem and tells him that is his destiny as St. George. RCK wants to stay where he is, but Contemplation insists he must finish his earthly quest. Contemplation tells RCK the truth story of his birth in England and being switched by a Faery.

Canto 11: Una and RCK leave for Una’s home and the dragon.

RCK and the dragon fight for three days. At the end of the first day, RCK is knocked down and falls into the Well of Life. He is like new the next day.

Near the end of the second day, RCK falls next to the Tree of Life, whose balm restores him.

On the third day RCK kills the dragon.

Canto 12: RCK and Una are betrothed, but RCK must return to serve the Faery Queene for six more years.

A messenger arrives (who turns out to be Archimago), bringing a message from Fidessa claiming that RCK is betrothed to her. Her claim is dismissed and the marriage of RCK and Una is celebrated.