

JOHN DALTON

1709--1763

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from *A Descriptive Poem, Addressed to Two Ladies, at their Return from Viewing the Mines, near Whitehaven*

AGAPE the sooty collier stands,
His axe suspended in his hands,
His Ethiopian teeth the while
'Grin horrible a ghastly smile,'
To see two goddesses so fair
Descend to him from fields of air.
Not greater wonder seized th' abode
Of gloomy Dis, infernal god,
With pity when th' Orphean lyre
Did ev'ry iron heart inspire, 10
Soothed tortured ghosts with heavenly strains,
And respited eternal pains.

But on you move through ways less steep
To loftier chambers of the deep,
Whose jetty pillars seem to groan
Beneath a ponderous roof of stone.
Then with increasing wonder gaze
The dark inextricable maze,
Where cavern crossing cavern meets
(City of subterraneous streets!), 20
Where in a triple storey end
Mines that o'er mines by flights ascend.

But who in order can relate
What terrors still your steps await?
How issuing from the sulphurous coal
Thick Acherontic rivers roll?
How in close centre of these mines,
Where orient morning never shines,
Nor the winged zephyrs e'er resort,
Infernal Darkness holds her court? 30
How, breathless, with faint pace and slow,
Through her grim sultry realm you go,
Till purer rising gales dispense
Their cordials to the sick'ning sense?

Your progress next the wondering muse
Through narrow galleries pursues;
Where earth, the miner's way to close,
Did once the massy rock oppose.
In vain: his daring axe he heaves,
Towards the black vein a passage cleaves: 40
Dissevered by the nitrous blast,

The stubborn barrier bursts at last.
Thus, urged by Hunger's clamorous call,
Incessant Labour conquers all.

In spacious rooms once more you tread,
Whose roofs with figures quaint o'erspread
Wild nature paints with various dyes,
With such as tinge the evening skies.

A different scene to this succeeds:

The dreary road abruptly leads 50
Down to the cold and humid caves,
Where hissing fall the turbid waves.

Resounding deep through glimmering shades
The clank of chains your ears invades.
Through pits profound from distant day
Scarce travels down light's languid ray.

High on huge axis heaved above,
See balanced beams unwearied move!
While, pent within the iron womb
Of boiling cauldrons, pants for room 60

Expanded Steam, and shrinks or swells,
As cold restrains or heat impels;
And, ready for the vacant space,
Incumbent Air resumes his place,
Depressing with stupendous force
Whate'er resists his downward course.
Pumps moved by rods from ponderous beams
Arrest the unsuspecting streams,
Which soon a sluggish pool would lie;
Then spout them foaming to the sky. 70

Sagacious Savery! Taught by thee
Discordant elements agree,
Fire, water, air, heat, cold unite,
And listed in one service fight;
Pure streams to thirsty cities send,
Or deepest mines from floods defend.
Man's richest gift thy work will shine;
Rome's aqueducts were poor to thine!

At last the long descent is o'er;
Above your heads the billows roar. 80

High o'er your heads they roar in vain:
Not all the surges of the main
The dark recess can e'er disclose,
Rocks heaped on rocks th' attempt oppose;
Thrice Dover's cliff from you the tides
With interposing roof divides!

From such abyss restored to light,
Invade no more the realms of night.
For heroines it may well suffice
Once to have left these azure skies. 90
Heroes themselves, in days of yore,

Bold as they were, achieved no more.
Without a dread descent you may
The mines in their effects survey,
And with an easy eye look down
On that fair port and happy town.

Where late, along the naked strand,
The fisher's cot did lonely stand,
And his poor bark unsheltered lay,
Of every swelling surge the prey,
Now lofty piers their arms extend,
And with their strong embraces bend
Round crowded fleets, which safe defy
All storms that rend the wintry sky,
And bulwarks beyond bulwarks chain
The fury of the roaring main.

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The peopled vale fair dwellings fill,
And lengthening streets ascend the hill;
Where Industry, intent to thrive,
Brings all her honey to the hive,
Religion strikes with reverent awe,
Example works th' effect of law,
And Plenty's flowing cup we see
Untainted yet by Luxury.

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These are the glories of the mine!
Creative Commerce, these are thine!

(1755)