

# TO A MOUSE

ROBERT BURNS



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*On turning her up in her nest,  
with the plough.*

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**I**n the words of Thomas Carlyle, Burns “rises to the high, stoops to the low, and is brother and playmate to all nature.”

This is, by readers gentle and readers simple, acknowledged to be one of the most perfect little gems that ever human genius produced.

One of its couplets has passed into a proverb:

*“The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men,  
gang aft agley.”*

Surely one of the finest poems written by Burns, containing some of the most famous and memorable lines ever written by a poet, yet, to this day not really understood by the mass of English-speaking poetry lovers, for no other reason than that the dialect causes it to be read as though in a foreign language.

All readers of Burns know of the “*Wee sleekit cow’rin tim’rous beastie*” but not many understand the sadness and despair contained within the lines of this poem. What was the Bard saying when he was inspired by turning up a fieldmouse in her nest one day while out ploughing?

- George Wilkie

**W**ee, fleeket, cowran, tim'rous *beastie*,  
O, what panic's in thy breastie !  
Thou need na start awa fae hafty,  
                    Wi' bickering brattle !  
I wad be laith to rin an' chafe thee,  
                    Wi' murd'ring *pattle* !

The poet is doing his utmost to assure this terrified little creature that he has no intention of causing it any harm.

bickerin' brattle = scurry, run;

laith = loath;

pattle = a small spade for cleaning a plough

I'm truly forry Man's dominion  
Has broken Nature's social union,  
An' justifies that ill opinion,  
Which makes thee startle,  
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,  
An' *fellow-mortal*!

He then goes on to apologise to the mouse for the behaviour of mankind using beautiful prose which requires neither translation nor interpretation. Listen to what he is saying, and you will be well on your way to understand what made Burns such a greatly loved man. Note how he equates himself with the mouse in life's great plan.

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may *thieve*;  
What then? poor beaftie, thou maun live!  
A *daimen-icker* in a thrave  
    'S a fma' request:  
I'll get a bleffin wi' the lave,  
    An' never mifs't!

Here he tells the mouse that he realizes its need to steal the odd ear of corn, and he does not really mind. He'll get by with remainder and never miss it.

daimen = occasional;  
icker = an ear of corn;  
thrave = twenty four sheaves;  
lave = remainder

Thy wee-bit *houfie*, too, in ruin !  
It's silly wa's the win's are ftrewin !  
An' naething, now, to big a new ane,  
    O' foggage green !  
An' bleak *December's winds* enfuin,  
    Baith fneel an' keen!

Dismay at the enormity of the problems he has brought on the mouse causes him to reflect on what he has done - destroyed her home at a time when it is impossible to rebuild. There is no grass to build a new home and the December winds are cold and sharp. Her preparations for winter are gone!

big = build;  
foggage = moss;  
baith = both

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waft,  
An' weary *Winter* comin faft,  
An' cozie here, beneath the blaft,  
                  Thou thought to dwell,  
Till crash ! the cruel *coulter* paft  
                  Out thro' thy cell.

Where the mouse had thought that she was prepared for winter in her comfortable little nest in the ground, now she is faced with trying to survive in a most unfriendly climate, with little or no hope in sight.

cosie = comfortable;  
coulter; = iron cutter in front of a ploughshare

That wee-bit heap o' leaves an' fribble,  
Has coft thee monie a weary nibble !  
Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,  
    But house or hald.  
To thole the Winter's *fleety dribble*,  
    An' *cranreuch* cauld!

It seems probable that here the poet is really comparing his own hard times with that of the mouse – a life of harsh struggle, with little or no reward at the end.

monie = many;  
thole = to endure;  
dribble = drizzle;  
cranreuch = hoar-frost;  
cauld = cold

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,  
In proving *forefight* may be vain:  
The best laid schemes o' *Mice an' Men*,  
Gang aft agley,  
An' leave us nought but grief an' pain,  
For promis'd joy!

How many times have people glibly trotted out, “The best laid schemes” without realising that they were quoting from Burns?

The sadness, the despair, the insight contained within this verse are truly remarkable and deeply moving.

no thy-lane = not alone;  
gan aft agley = often go awry

Still, thou art bleft, compar'd wi' me !  
The *present* only toucheth thee:  
But Och ! I backward caft my e'e,  
                    On prospects drear !  
An' forward, tho' I canna *fee*,  
                    I *gues*s an' *fear* !

This final verse reveals the absolute despondency that Burns was feeling at this stage in his life. Not at all what one might expect from a young man of twenty-six, supposedly so popular with the lassies, and with his whole life ahead of him, but nevertheless expressing sentiments with which many of us today can easily relate.

Thanks to George Wilkie for writing the explanation of this poem, found in his book, *Understanding Robert Burns*.

The designer apologizes for any copyright infringement this small effort may represent. The content was gleaned from the internet in a moment of curiosity, and at a moment when the oft-used and paraphrased line rang particularly strong and clear.

It seemed fitting to set up this small offering for the elucidation of others who have also unknowingly invoked the spirit of Burns, filtered through Steinbeck, and who likewise, have seen their plans “gang aft agley”.

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after Googling  
“best laid plans...”  
and finding that Steinbeck  
penned the title of his novella  
*Of Mice and Men* based on this short,  
earthy, and heartfelt poem by Robert Burns.



