TO A MOUSE

Robert Burns
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On turning her up in her nest,
with the plough.

November, 1785

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In 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
Wee, fleeket, cowran, tim’rous beastie,
O, what panic’s in thy beastie!
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
Robert Burns

I'm truly sorry 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!

To A Mouse

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.
Robert Burns

To A Mouse

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may *thieve*;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A *daimen-icker* in a thrawe
'S a *sma' requet,*
I'll get a bleffin wi’ the lave,
   An' never mis'st!

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;
thrawe = twenty four sheaves;
lave = remainder
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;
foaggae = moss;
baith = both
Robert Burns

Thou saw the fields laid bare an’waft,
An’ weary Winter comin fast,
An’ cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell,
Till crash! the cruel coulters past
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

To A Mouse
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Robert Burns

That wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!
Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,
But house or hald.
To thole the Winter's fleetly 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
Robert Burns

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

To A Mouse

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 blest, compar'd wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho'I canna see,
I gues 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.
To A Mouse

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”.

Robert Burns
Designed and laid out in Quark XPress 7, in Thorne Shaded & Adobe Caslon by Michael J Babcock Jr at interrobang letterpress 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.
"To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest With the Plough, November, 1785"[1][2] is a Scots Language poem written by Robert Burns in 1785, and was included in the Kilmarnock volume.[3] According to legend, Burns was ploughing in the fields and accidentally destroyed a mouse’s nest, which it needed to survive the winter. "To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough" (also known as just "To a Mouse") is a poem written by Robert Burns. The poem was written in Scots in 1785. "To a Mouse" is about a young man who accidentally overturns the soil of a mouse’s nest. John Steinbeck named his novella Of Mice and Men after a line in the seventh stanza of the poem. This line is: "The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men / Gang aft agley" ("The best laid schemes of mice and men / Go often askew").