

Name: _____ Class: _____

To a Mouse

On Turning up in Her Nest with the Plough, November, 1785

By Robert Burns
1785

Robert Burns (1759-1796) was a Scottish poet and lyricist. In the following poem, a speaker come across a mouse while ploughing a field. As you read, take notes on the speaker's feelings toward the mouse.

MODERN VERSION

- [1] Little, artful, cowering,¹ timid beast,
Oh, what a panic is in your heart!
You need not start away so hasty
 With bickering prattle!²
- [5] I would be loath³ to run and chase you,
 With murdering scraper

I'm truly sorry man's dominion⁴
Has broken Nature's social union,
And justifies that ill opinion

- [10] Which makes you startle
At me, your poor, earth born companion
 And fellow mortal!

I doubt not, sometimes, that you may steal;
What then? Poor beast, you must live!

- [15] An odd ear⁵ in twenty-four sheaves⁶
 Is a small request;
I will get a blessing with what is left,
 And never miss it.

Your small house, too, in ruin!

- [20] Its feeble walls the winds are scattering!
And nothing now, to build a new one,
 Of coarse green foliage!⁷
And bleak December's winds coming,
 Both bitter and piercing!



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1. **Cower** (*verb*): to crouch down in fear
 2. foolish talk
 3. unwilling
 4. **Dominion** (*noun*): control
 5. a single grain plant
 6. a bundle of grain stalks that are tied together after being cut
 7. plant leaves

[25] You saw the fields laid bare and empty,
And weary winter coming fast,
And cozy here, beneath the blast,
 You thought to dwell,
Till crash! The cruel plough passed
[30] Out through your cell.

That small heap of leaves and stubble,
Has cost you many a weary nibble!
Now you are turned out, for all your trouble,
 Without house or holding,
[35] To endure the winter's sleety dribble,
 And hoar-frost⁸ cold.

But Mouse, you are not alone,
In proving foresight⁹ may be vain:¹⁰
The best laid schemes of mice and men
[40] Go often askew,¹¹
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,
 For promised joy!

Still you are blessed, compared with me!
The present only touches you:
[45] But oh! I backward cast my eye,
 On prospects¹² dreary!
And forward, though I cannot see,
 I guess and fear!

SCOTS VERSION

[46] Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie,
[51] O, what a panic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
 Wi' bickerin brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee
 Wi' murd'ring pattle!

8. a white coating of ice crystals

9. **Foresight** (*noun*): the ability to predict what will happen or what is needed in the future

10. **Vain** (*adjective*): producing no result; useless

11. crooked, out of line, or wrong

12. a view or outlook

[56] 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,
[61] An' fellow-mortal!

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen-icker in a thrave
'S a sma' request:
[66] I'll get a blessin wi' the lave,
An' never miss 't!

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!
It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!
An' naething, now, to big a new ane,
[71] O' foggage green!
An' bleak December's winds ensuin,
Baith snell an' keen!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' waste,
An' weary Winter comin fast,
[76] An' cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell,
Till crash! the cruel coulter past
Out thro' thy cell.

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 sleety dribble,
[81] An' cranreuch cauld!

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

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
[96] An' forward tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!