

The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley

In the early part of Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations* a somewhat pompous London lawyer appears at the home of a country blacksmith named Joe Gargery, brother-in-law and more like parent of the boy Philip "Pip" Pirrip. "My name is Jaggers," says the lawyer. "I am the bearer of an offer to relieve you of this young fellow your apprentice [Pip] . . . I am instructed to communicate to him that he will come into a handsome property, that he be immediately removed from his present sphere of life . . . and be brought up as a gentleman . . . a young fellow of great expectations."

Great expectations. Pip can only conclude that a Miss Havisham must be his benefactor – a wealthy recluse whom he occasionally wheels around her estate. And with this in mind off he goes to London to be dressed and taught and to bear himself as a well-supported and arrogant urban fellow.

Except that even as he is enjoying his new status and dressing the part and fast becoming a snob he is visited by his actual benefactor, a now wealthy ex-convict from Australia who remembered a kindness done to him by Pip when Pip was a boy. Tables turned. Pip's expectations will not at all be what he expected for by returning to England this ex-convict has become a wanted man – more a burden than benefactor.

As the Scots poet Robert Burns once wrote: *The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley* [Go often askew]. Burns wrote that line in his poem titled *To a Mouse*. The occasion? He was out plowing and inadvertently destroyed a field mouse's winter nest, scaring it almost to death. He ponders with regret how the mouse built its nest to withstand winter: *Thy wee bit housie . . . in ruin! / . . . An' naething (nothing), now, to big (build) a new ane (one) / . . . Now thou's turn'd out, for a' [all] thy trouble*. But what's so new? As Burns says: . . . *Mousie, thou art not thy-lane [alone] / In proving foresight may be vain . . .*

I refer to these moments in literature because I myself had plans last weekend. My land line phones had broken down. All static, then dead. So I called my AT&T number and talked to a canned voice for a while until I was told a technician would come on Sunday between 8 am and 6 pm. I took the opportunity to clean up our TV room with its soiled parakeet cage and the overall untidiness of the space – lest the technician be appalled. But he never came. My phones remained inactive. I fretted over the failure of my efforts to revive my phones. My best-laid schemes had gone *agley!*

Until Sunday evening I thought: well at least after months of postponement my TV space was spic and span (bird cage included). And then I thought: aside from my intended expectations for that day – the repair of my phones – maybe God had a different goal in mind, namely that I finally clean up my TV room! That while I was pointed passionately in one direction, God intended that I go in another direction – and so as a lesson in life I thought: maybe when I am disappointed if my chosen path is closed (like Highway 37), perhaps my path to peace of mind lies in another direction – that *God* wills.

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