

## The Witch of Coös

I stayed the night for shelter at a farm  
Behind the mountains, with a mother and son,  
Two old-believers. They did all the talking.

MOTHER Folks think a witch who has familiar spirits  
She could call up to pass a winter evening,  
But won't, should be burned at the stake or something.  
Summoning spirits isn't 'Button, button,  
Who's got the button,' I would have them know.

SON: Mother can make a common table rear  
And kick with two legs like an army mule.

MOTHER: And when I've done it, what good have I  
done?  
Rather than tip a table for you, let me  
Tell you what Ralle the Sioux Control once told me.  
He said the dead had souls, but when I asked him  
How could that be -- I thought the dead were souls,  
He broke my trance. Don't that make you suspicious  
That there's something the dead are keeping back?  
Yes, there's something the dead are keeping back.

SON: You wouldn't want to tell him what we have  
Up attic, mother?

MOTHER: Bones -- a skeleton.

SON: But the headboard of mother's bed is pushed  
Against the' attic door: the door is nailed.  
It's harmless. Mother hears it in the night  
Halting perplexed behind the barrier  
Of door and headboard. Where it wants to get  
Is back into the cellar where it came from.

MOTHER: We'll never let them, will we, son! We'll  
never !

SON: It left the cellar forty years ago  
And carried itself like a pile of dishes  
Up one flight from the cellar to the kitchen,  
Another from the kitchen to the bedroom,  
Another from the bedroom to the attic,  
Right past both father and mother, and neither stopped  
it.  
Father had gone upstairs; mother was downstairs.  
I was a baby: I don't know where I was.

MOTHER: The only fault my husband found with me --  
I went to sleep before I went to bed,  
Especially in winter when the bed  
Might just as well be ice and the clothes snow.

The night the bones came up the cellar-stairs  
Toffile had gone to bed alone and left me,  
But left an open door to cool the room off  
So as to sort of turn me out of it.  
I was just coming to myself enough  
To wonder where the cold was coming from,  
When I heard Toffile upstairs in the bedroom  
And thought I heard him downstairs in the cellar.  
The board we had laid down to walk dry-shod on  
When there was water in the cellar in spring  
Struck the hard cellar bottom. And then someone  
Began the stairs, two footsteps for each step,  
The way a man with one leg and a crutch,  
Or a little child, comes up. It wasn't Toffile:  
It wasn't anyone who could be there.  
The bulkhead double-doors were double-locked  
And swollen tight and buried under snow.  
The cellar windows were banked up with sawdust  
And swollen tight and buried under snow.  
It was the bones. I knew them -- and good reason.  
My first impulse was to get to the knob  
And hold the door. But the bones didn't try  
The door; they halted helpless on the landing,  
Waiting for things to happen in their favour.'  
The faintest restless rustling ran all through them.  
I never could have done the thing I did  
If the wish hadn't been too strong in me  
To see how they were mounted for this walk.  
I had a vision of them put together  
Not like a man, but like a chandelier.  
So suddenly I flung the door wide on him.  
A moment he stood balancing with emotion,  
And all but lost himself. (A tongue of fire  
Flashed out and licked along his upper teeth.  
Smoke rolled inside the sockets of his eyes.)  
Then he came at me with one hand outstretched,  
The way he did in life once; but this time  
I struck the hand off brittle on the floor,  
And fell back from him on the floor myself.  
The finger-pieces slid in all directions.  
(Where did I see one of those pieces lately?  
Hand me my button-box- it must be there.)  
I sat up on the floor and shouted, 'Toffile,  
It's coming up to you.' It had its choice  
Of the door to the cellar or the hall.  
It took the hall door for the novelty,  
And set off briskly for so slow a thing,  
Stillgoing every which way in the joints, though,  
So that it looked like lightning or a scribble,  
>From the slap I had just now given its hand.  
I listened till it almost climbed the stairs  
>From the hall to the only finished bedroom,  
Before I got up to do anything;

Then ran and shouted, 'Shut the bedroom door,  
Toffile, for my sake!' 'Company?' he said,  
'Don't make me get up; I'm too warm in bed.'  
So lying forward weakly on the handrail  
I pushed myself upstairs, and in the light  
(The kitchen had been dark) I had to own  
I could see nothing. 'Toffile, I don't see it.  
It's with us in the room though. It's the bones.'  
'What bones?' 'The cellar bones- out of the grave.'  
That made him throw his bare legs out of bed  
And sit up by me and take hold of me.  
I wanted to put out the light and see  
If I could see it, or else mow the room,  
With our arms at the level of our knees,  
And bring the chalk-pile down. 'I'll tell you what-  
It's looking for another door to try.  
The uncommonly deep snow has made him think  
Of his old song, The Wild Colonial Boy,  
He always used to sing along the tote-road.  
He's after an open door to get out-doors.  
Let's trap him with an open door up attic.'  
Toffile agreed to that, and sure enough,  
Almost the moment he was given an opening,  
The steps began to climb the attic stairs.  
I heard them. Toffile didn't seem to hear them.  
'Quick !' I slammed to the door and held the knob.  
'Toffile, get nails.' I made him nail the door shut,  
And push the headboard of the bed against it.  
Then we asked was there anything  
Up attic that we'd ever want again.  
The attic was less to us than the cellar.  
If the bones liked the attic, let them have it.  
Let them stay in the attic. When they sometimes  
Come down the stairs at night and stand perplexed  
Behind the door and headboard of the bed,  
Brushing their chalky skull with chalky fingers,  
With sounds like the dry rattling of a shutter,  
That's what I sit up in the dark to say-  
To no one any more since Toffile died.  
2o3 Let them stay in the attic since they went there.  
I promised Toffile to be cruel to them  
For helping them be cruel once to him.

SON: We think they had a grave down in the cellar.

MOTHER: We know they had a grave down in the cellar.

SON: We never could find out whose bones they were.

MOTHER: Yes, we could too, son. Tell the truth for once.

They were a man's his father killed for me.

I mean a man he killed instead of me.

The least I could do was to help dig their grave.

We were about it one night in the cellar.  
Son knows the story: but 'twas not for him  
To tell the truth, suppose the time had come.  
Son looks surprised to see me end a lie  
We'd kept all these years between ourselves  
So as to have it ready for outsiders.  
But to-night I don't care enough to lie-  
I don't remember why I ever cared.  
Toffile, if he were here, I don't believe  
Could tell you why he ever cared himself-

She hadn't found the finger-bone she wanted  
Among the buttons poured out in her lap.  
I verified the name next morning: Toffile.  
The rural letter-box said Toffile Lajway.

### About the Author

**Robert Frost** (1874-1963) was born in San Francisco, California. His father William Frost, a journalist and an ardent Democrat, died when Frost was about eleven years old. His Scottish mother, the former Isabelle Moody, resumed her career as a schoolteacher to support her family. The family lived in Lawrence, Massachusetts, with Frost's paternal grandfather, William Prescott Frost, who gave his grandson a good schooling. In 1892...

Source: <http://poems.writers-network.com>