



The Witch of Coös¹

by Robert Frost

I stayed the night for shelter at a farm
Behind the mountain, with a mother and son,
Two old-believers.² They did all the talking.

¹Coös (kō'os).

²old-believers, people who believe in spiritualism (belief that spirits of the dead communicate with the living through mediums).

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MOTHER. Folks think a witch who has familiar spirits³
She could call up to pass a winter evening, 5
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. 10

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 Control⁴ once told me.
He said the dead had souls, but when I asked him 15
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? 20

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 25
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 30
Up one flight from the cellar to the kitchen,
Another from the kitchen to the bedroom,

³*familiar spirits*. A familiar was thought to be a spirit which acted as a servant to a particular person.

⁴*Ralle the Sioux Control*. In spiritualism, a control is a spirit who is supposed to direct the actions and speech of a medium, or person who receives messages from the spirit world. Often the control is thought to be an Indian spirit.

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Another from the bedroom to the attic,
Right past both father and mother, and neither stopped it.
Father had gone upstairs; mother was downstairs. 35
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. 40
The night the bones came up the cellar-stairs
Toffile^s 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 45
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 50
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. 55
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. 60
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 favor.
The faintest restless rustling ran all through them. 65
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. 70
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.) 75

^sToffile (tof'el).

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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. 80
(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. 85
It took the hall door for the novelty,
And set off briskly for so slow a thing,
Still going 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. 90
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, 95
'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. 100
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 105
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 110
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 outdoors.
Let's trap him with an open door up attic.'
Toffile agreed to that, and sure enough, 115
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 120

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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. 125
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, 130
That's what I sit up in the dark to say—
To no one any more since Toffile died.
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. 135

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. 140
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. 145
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 tonight I don't care enough to lie—
I don't remember why I ever cared. 150
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. 155
I verified the name next morning: Toffile.
The rural letter box said Toffile Lajway.

P Talking it over

- 1. a. Whose bones were in the cellar?
 b. How did they get there?
 c. What prompted the bones to climb the cellar steps? How did they sound as they came up?
- 2. a. Why did the mother let them out of the cellar?
 b. Why did only the mother see the bones?
- 3. What was Toffile's reaction when she shouted, 'Shut the bedroom door. . . .'?
- 4. a. How did they succeed in getting the skeleton into the attic?
 b. Why does the mother want to keep it locked there? How long has it been there?
 c. How does she know it's still there?
- 5. a. Why does the son say, "We never could find out whose bones they were"?
 b. About how old do you think the mother is?
 c. Find the lines which tell how she thinks Toffile would react now.
 d. Why is the mother ready to tell the truth now?

The poet of all America

When Robert Frost died in 1963, at the age of eighty-eight, President Kennedy said that the poet gave the nation "a body of . . . verse from which Americans will forever gain joy and understanding."

Frost was born in San Francisco, but when he was ten his father died and Frost and his mother moved back to New England. He tried college twice, but he disliked it and left to become a farmer and school teacher. He married and in 1912 he sold his farm and took his family to England.

Frost's poems were at first consistently rejected by American publishers. American



friends in England, however, recognized the quality of his work and helped to get his first book published. As a result he returned home to find American publishers eager to publish his work. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his poetry in 1924, an honor he won three more times.

One of the most dramatic incidents in Frost's later life occurred at President Kennedy's inauguration. He was invited to write a poem for the occasion, but when he rose to read it the strong wind and bright sun made it difficult for him to read what he had written. Millions of Americans watching on television sensed his distress, but Frost simply put aside his papers and recited from memory a poem he had written years before that fit the occasion perfectly. His courage and determination on the platform were the same qualities that made him the great American poet of our time.