

## The Witch of Coös

I STAID the night for shelter at a farm Behind the mountain, with a mother and son, Two old-believers. They did all the talking. The 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,? you?re to understand.

The Son

Mother can make a common table rear

And kick with two legs like an army mule.

The 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 that could 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.

The Son

You wouldn?t want to tell him what we have

Up attic, mother?

The Mother

Bones?a skeleton.

The 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.

The Mother

We?ll never let them, will we, son? We?ll never!

The 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.

## The 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 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 favor. 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, 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. 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 like 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.    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.

The Son

We think they had a grave down in the cellar.

The Mother

We know they had a grave down in the cellar.

The Son

We never could find out whose bones they were.

The 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 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 up 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.    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 Barre.

**Poetic Form:**

[Blank verse](#) [1]

**Group:**

[Subscribe to group](#) [2]

**Poet:**

[Robert Frost](#) [3]

**Poem Image:**



**Group visibility:**

Public - accessible to all site users

**Poem:**

The Witch of Coos <sup>[4]</sup>

**Publication Date:**

Sunday, January 1, 1922

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/witch-co%C3%B6s-0>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/poetic-form/blank-verse>

[2]

[http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/user/login?destination=group/node/43181/subscribe/og\\_user\\_node](http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/user/login?destination=group/node/43181/subscribe/og_user_node)

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/robert-frost>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/witch-coos>