

LEVELED BOOK • Q

# The Golden Flute



A Yao Folktale Retold by Robert Morgan  
Illustrated by Anik McGrory

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Once upon a time a woman and her daughter lived in the mountains. The daughter liked to dress in red. For this reason, she was called Little Red.

One day Little Red and her mother were working in the fields. All of a sudden a gale blew up, and in the sky there appeared an evil dragon. It stretched down its claws, caught Little Red in a tight grip, and flew off with her toward the west.

Little Red's mother vaguely heard her daughter's words carried on the wind:

"Oh mother, oh mother, as dear as can be!  
My brother, my brother will rescue me!"

Wiping away her tears, Little Red's mother gazed into the sky and said, "But I only have a daughter. Who can this brother be?"





Little Red's mother staggered toward home, and when she had gotten halfway there, her hair caught in the branches of a bayberry tree growing by the roadside. While she was untangling her hair, she spotted a red, red berry dangling from a twig. She picked it and swallowed it without thinking.

When she arrived home, the woman gave birth to a boy with a round head and red cheeks. She named the boy Little Bayberry.

Bayberry grew up very quickly, and in a few days he was a young boy of fourteen or fifteen.

His mother wanted to ask Bayberry to rescue his sister, but she couldn't bring herself to give him such a dangerous job. All she could do was weep to herself in secret.





One day a crow landed on the roof of the woman's house and cried:

"Your sister is suffering out there, out there!  
She's weeping in the evil dragon's lair!  
Bloodstains on her back,  
She's digging rocks with hands so bare!"

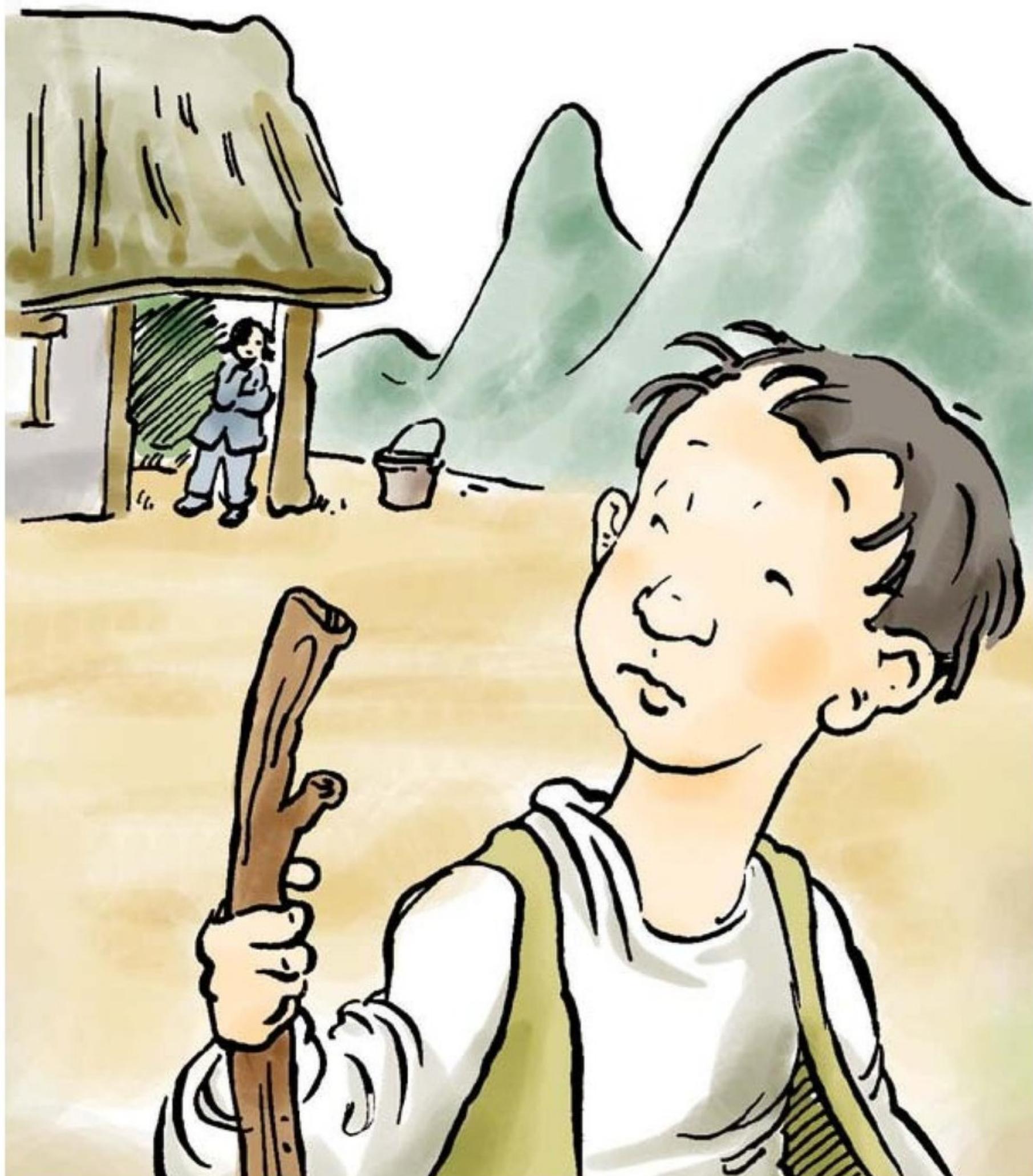


Upon hearing this, Bayberry asked his mother, "Do I have a sister?"

Tears streaming down her cheeks, his mother replied, "Yes, my son, you do. Because she loved to dress in red, she was called Little Red. An evil dragon that has killed so many people came and took her away."

Bayberry picked up a big stick and said,  
“I’m going to rescue Little Red and kill that  
evil dragon. Then it can’t do any more harm!”

His mother leaned against the doorframe  
and through misty eyes watched her son  
march away.





Bayberry walked for miles and miles. On a mountain road ahead of him, he saw a large rock blocking the way that was pointed and rubbed smooth by all the travelers who had had to climb it. One wrong step would mean a nasty fall.

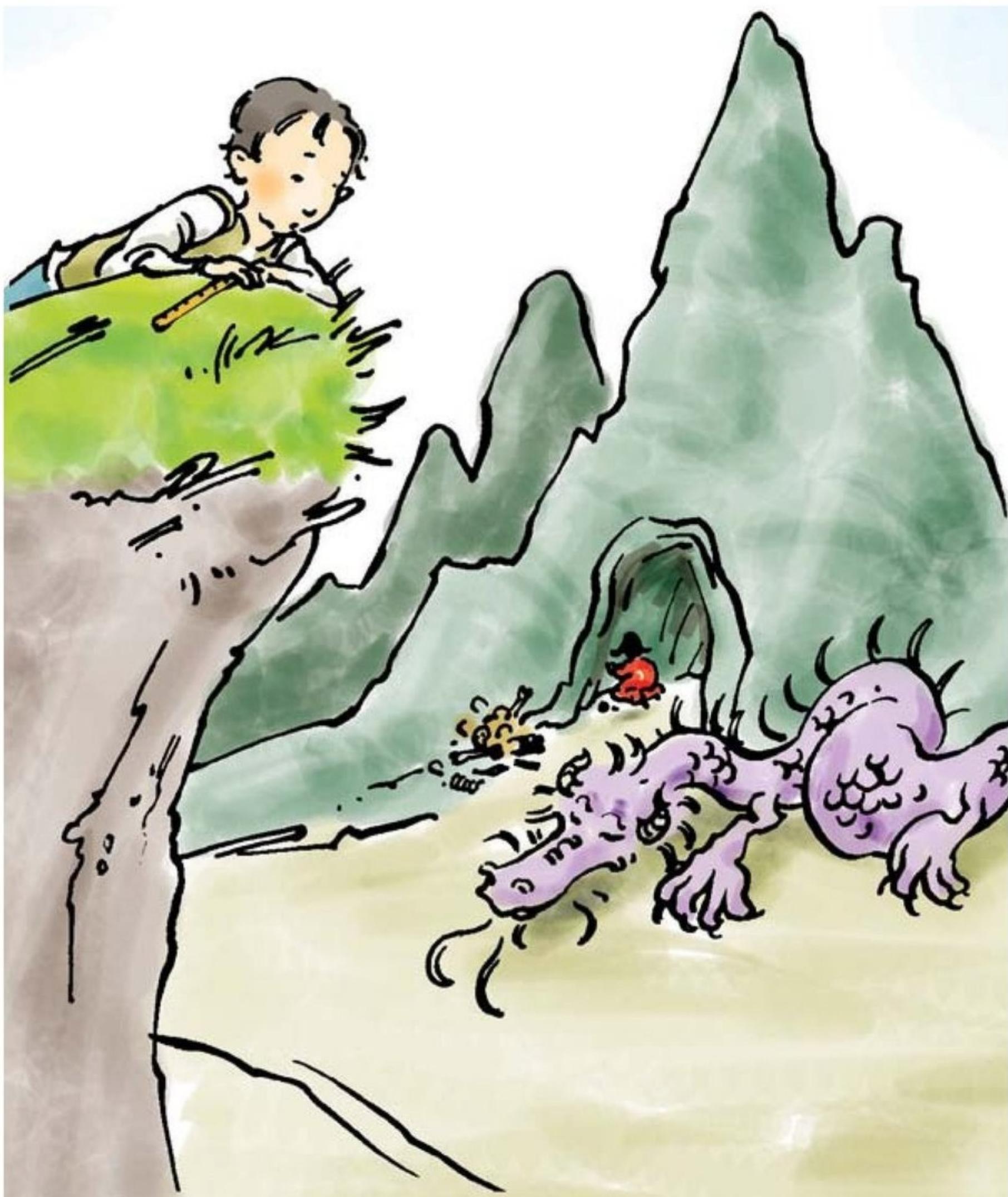
Bayberry said, "This is my first obstacle! If I don't remove it now, it will be the undoing of many more people." He thrust his stick under the rock and heaved with all his might. There was a great "crack!" and the stick broke in two. Then he put both his hands under the rock and tried to move it with all his strength. The rock rolled down into the valley.



Just at that moment, a shining golden flute appeared in the hole where the rock had been. Bayberry picked it up and blew on it. It gave out a sweet sound.

Suddenly, all the earthworms, frogs, and lizards by the roadside began to dance. The quicker the tune, the faster the creatures danced. As soon as the music finished, they stopped dancing. Bayberry had an idea: "Ah! Now I can deal with the evil dragon."





He strode away with the golden flute in hand. He climbed a huge, rocky mountain and saw a ferocious-looking dragon at the entrance to a cave. Piles of human bones lay all around it. He also saw a girl in red chiseling away at the cave. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

The evil dragon whipped the girl on the back with its tail and shouted angrily at her:

"Most ungrateful, loathsome Mistress Red!  
Since with me you will not wed,  
Day by day,  
Rock by rock,  
Carve me out a handsome cave,  
Or I'll send you to your grave!"





Bayberry realized that the girl was none other than his sister. He shouted:

“Wicked monster! Evil fiend!  
To torment my sister so!  
Till your wretched life shall end,  
On this flute I’ll blow and blow!”

Bayberry began to blow on his golden flute. The music made the evil dragon dance despite itself. Little Red put down her chisel and stepped out of the cave to watch.



Bayberry continued to blow on the flute. The evil dragon continued to dance, twisting and squirming. The quicker the tune, the faster the evil dragon danced.

Little Red came over and wanted to speak to her brother. With a gesture of his hand, Bayberry showed her that he could not stop playing the flute. If he did, the evil dragon would eat them both up.

Bayberry kept blowing for all he was worth, and the evil dragon stretched his long waist and kept dancing around in time to the music.

Fire came from the evil dragon's eyes,  
steam from its nostrils, and panting breath  
from its mouth. The dragon pleaded:

"Ho-ho-ho! Brother, you're the stronger!  
Blow no more! Torture me no longer!  
I'll send her home,  
If you leave me alone!"

Bayberry had no intention of stopping.  
As he blew, he walked toward a big pond.  
The evil dragon followed him to the bank  
of the pond, squirming and dancing all the  
way. With a great splash, the evil dragon fell  
into the pond, and the water rose several feet.



The evil dragon was utterly exhausted.  
Fire came from its eyes, steam from its  
nostrils, and panting breath from its mouth.  
It begged again in a hoarse voice:

"Ho-ho-ho! Brother, you're the stronger!  
Let me alone and I'll stay in this pond  
And torture folk no longer!"





Bayberry replied:

“Wicked fiend!

This is my bargain.

Stay at the bottom of this pond,

And never do harm again.”

The evil dragon kept nodding its head.  
As soon as the golden flute stopped blowing,  
the dragon sank to the bottom of the pond.

Bayberry took hold of his sister’s hand and  
walked happily away.

Not long after Bayberry and Little Red set off, they heard the sound of water splashing in the pond. They looked over their shoulders and saw the evil dragon emerge from the pond. It raised its head and flew in their direction, baring its fangs and clawing the air.

Little Red cried:

"Go deep when digging a well;  
Pull up the roots when hoeing a field.  
While that dragon is still alive,  
To kindly ways he'll never yield."





Bayberry rushed back to the pond  
and began to blow on his flute once more.  
The evil dragon fell back into the pond  
and began to dance again, splashing and  
squirming in the water.

Bayberry stood on the bank of the pond for  
seven days and nights, blowing a fast tune on  
his flute. Finally, the evil dragon could move  
no longer and floated on the surface of the  
water. Its days had come to an end.



Sister and brother joyfully returned home, dragging the body of the evil dragon along behind them. When their mother saw her two children coming home, her face lit up with happiness.

They peeled the dragon's skin to make a house, took out the dragon's bones to serve as pillars and beams, and cut off the dragon's horn to make a plow. With the dragon's horn they plowed the fields quickly and had no need of oxen. They plowed many fields, sowed lots of grain, and enjoyed a plentiful life.

This story is a retelling of a folktale of the Yao people. The Yao live in the mountainous regions of southern China, and also in Vietnam and Laos.

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