

The Crumbling Silver

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North American

Intermediate
3 min read

There is a clay bank on Little Neck, Long Island, where metallic nodules are now and then exposed by rain. Rustics declare them to be silver, and account for their crumbling on the theory that the metal is under a curse. A century ago the Montauks mined it, digging over enough soil to unearth these pellets now and again, and exchanging them at the nearest settlements for tobacco and rum. The seeming abundance of these lumps of silver aroused the cupidity of one Gardiner, a dweller in the central wilderness of the island, but none of the Indians would reveal the source of their treasure. One day Gardiner succeeded in getting an old chief so tipsy that, without realizing what he was doing, he led the white man to the clay bed and showed him the metallic spots glittering in the sun. With a cry of delight Gardiner sprang forward and tore at the earth with his fingers, while the Indian stood by laughing at his eagerness.

Presently a shade crossed the white man's face, for he thought that this vast treasure would have to be shared by others. It was too much to endure. He wanted all. He would be the richest man on earth. Stealing behind the Indian as he stood swaying and chuckling, he wrenched the hatchet from his belt and clove his skull at a blow. Then, dragging the body to a thicket and hiding it under stones and leaves, he hurried to his house for cart and pick and shovel, and returning with speed he dug out a half ton of the silver before sunset. The cart was loaded, and he set homeward, trembling with excitement and conjuring bright visions for his future, when a wailing sound from a thicket made him halt and turn pale. Noiselessly a figure glided from the bush. It was

the Indian he had killed. The form approached the treasure, flung up its arm, uttered a few guttural words; then a rising wind seemed to lift it from the ground and it drifted toward the Sound, fading like a cloud as it receded.

Full of misgiving, Gardiner drove to his home, and, by light of a lantern, transferred his treasure to his cellar. Was it the dulness of the candle that made the metal look so black? After a night of feverish tossing on his bed he arose and went to the cellar to gloat upon his wealth. The light of dawn fell on a heap of gray dust, a few brassy looking particles showing here and there. The curse of the ghost had been of power and the silver was silver no more. Mineralogists say that the nodules are iron pyrites. Perhaps so; but old residents know that they used to be silver.

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