

AMBER: ITS HISTORY AND MYSTERY

BY JAMES MILNE.

Illustrated by W. H. BUNNETT.

“**H**OW on earth did the fly get there?” The exclamation is so familiar that it is hardly necessary to note the reference as being to amber. We like to keep up little mysteries, to wrap ourselves in them and think hard. They are useful as a turn in conversation when the weather gets speechless.

Why the fly in the amber? Mr. John S. Weingott, of Fleet Street, in a conversation which I am to report, told me how simple was the answer. The subject of amber has its mysteries all the same, and many of these he unfolded to me with the full knowledge of an expert. His own collection of specimens is unique; and then, isn't the hobby getting to be quite extensive?

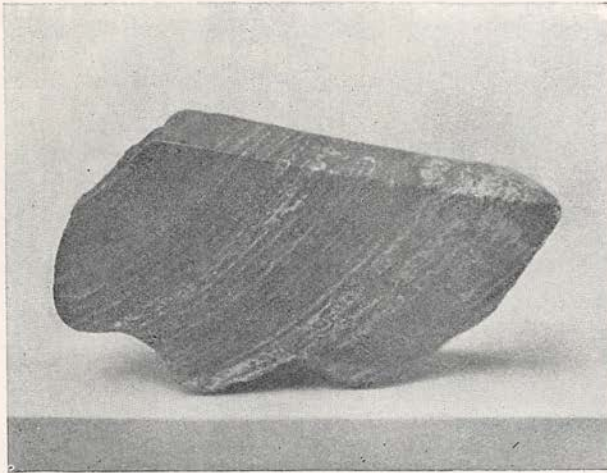
At least one member of the Royal family—Princess Louise, Marchioness of Lorne—has many trophies in amber.

These form another of the attractions of her home in the historic palace at Kensington. Lady Archibald Campbell, Lord Brassey, and Mr. Horniman, M.P., to go no further, have all been collectors. Apart from the hobby, as such, amber has recently been much in vogue for ornaments. That we shall discover as we proceed, with Mr. Weingott for guide, philosopher and friend.

“By all means,” he said, “let us settle the fly first; let us get it out of the road. What is amber? Why, the fossilised gum of the prehistoric pine tree. You have seen, perhaps, at Bournemouth how the pine

exudes its resin through the bark? Well, there were pines—who knows what species exactly?—which had a like peculiarity, at an early period in the history of the world. Insects would find themselves caught in those little blisters of gum; the fluid would engulf them as they alighted upon it. It may have been sweet and enticing—certainly sticky, or otherwise we should hardly have the fly in the amber. That pine gum was eventually, by the action of sea and earth, to be converted into the stuff with which every smoker is familiar. The gum clung to the fly all through the ages, while

being evolved into amber. We have the result to-day, as long generations have had it before us. The use of amber is old—very old—for we find it mentioned in the Bible.” Here is the reference of which he was thinking—Ezekiel i. verse 4: “And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a



AMBER SHOWING THE ANNULAR RINGS OF THE PINE TREE.

great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire.”

To proceed, Mr. Weingott sought out a little bit of amber—nothing more than the broken mouthpiece of a pipe—and to it applied a live match. The amber flickered and burned, sending up a particularly black smoke. But it was the scent of the burning with which I was to concern myself. Yes, you recalled the atmosphere of a Roman Catholic church during Mass, for, of course, amber is still a part of incense-making.

Then, a piece of amber, rubbed on the palm of one's hand for a few seconds, produced a peculiar aromatic odour—an odour which suggested a mixture of camphor and eucalyptus. This was obtained in a still stronger degree by rubbing on cloth—your coat sleeve, for example. Mr. Weingott explained that it formed a good rough test as between genuine amber and the imitation article. The latter, under the same treatment, gave forth a different odour—an odour which suggested camphor only. Imitation amber, I learned, was very injurious to smokers, for its use—and it was largely sold—brought about a painful soreness of the lips, tongue, palate, or gums. Doctors were well acquainted with the ailment, and when they suspected its presence, would at the outset ask a patient, "What sort of an amber mouthpiece has your pipe?"

Next, Mr. Weingott showed me some amber specimens notable for the flies preserved in them. In one there were three or four midges—the creatures that bite you in a country lane on a summer evening; and really they might have

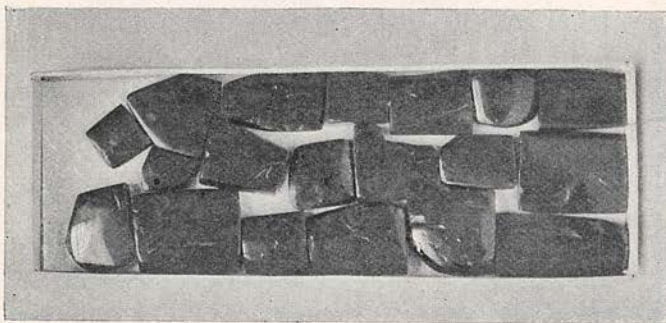
been still at the pastime. They seemed as natural as if they had just alighted on the back of your hand. Yet a member of the group showed signs of alarm, as if it were struggling to regain its wings before your other hand came brushing along. A microscope made out that the fellow had died in the act of kicking, and you beheld "the kick of millions of years," as Mr. Weingott expressively put it.

"It is wonderful," he continued, "that the pine gum should have captured live insects in such a beautiful manner. What I mean is, that they are preserved with such delicacy, with a lovingness which only Nature could have attained. That midge at which you were looking had enough reprieve to kick before being bottled down—he succumbed in the very act. The others alighted and were swallowed up, on the instant; not a flutter, not a movement, so finely fluid was

the gum." Mr. Weingott suggested to me a contrast—namely, that of making a fly prisoner on a patch of syrup. It would end an unrecognisable dot of exertions to get free—not the beautiful fly we had in the amber. Lizards, ants, moths, beetles, leaves, fragments of wood—all these have been mummified. Dr. Richard Klebs, the curator of the famous amber museum at Königsberg, has classified thousands of insects of which otherwise we should have had no direct evidence.

It is the centre of the amber industry, this town of Königsberg on the Baltic; and that brought us again to first principles. Where the Baltic now washes—so the scientific theory holds—there was once dry land covered by waving pines. There had been no sea dividing what are now the countries of Denmark and Norway, and therefore no Baltic. But look at a map of Europe, or draw yourself a rough sketch of these parts,

as Mr. Weingott did, in order to illustrate events. The salt water, ever modifying the earth's surface, delved here, until it reached those pine forests. The Cattegat, the Sound—that



FOSSILISED INSECTS IN AMBER.

was the line of advance; and the waters, descending upon the area beyond, made a Baltic Sea. The pines became an item of the bed of this ocean; they mated with the soil, which ate up the woody matter. But the gum of the pines proved itself superior to the forces in action, or rather, instead of decaying, it grew to something better. The ocean bed cradled the pine gum, and the ages rocked it, somewhere, as geologists think, about the tertiary epoch of the earth's formation.

"These points," Mr. Weingott went on, "take us as far as is necessary in reference to the origin of amber. You grasp the story which applies to that, and so you will be able to understand how we find the great amber beds lying in the Baltic, off the coasts of Prussia. There are none of importance on the Norwegian side, nor higher up the Baltic, where Russian interests begin. Why this?

Why, indeed! So it is. Ask Nature why it chose the area between Dantzic and Memel for these deposits. As has been mentioned, Königsberg is the heart of the amber region, and the actual fishery is mainly carried on from two villages, Palminicken and Craxteppelin."

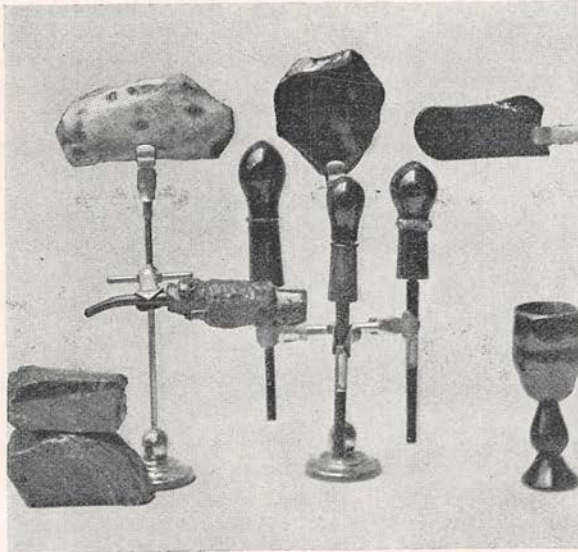
Here I asked for details as to the working of the industry, and Mr. Weingott was amply able to meet my curiosity. Once the Prussian Government followed the plan of granting licences, and on the strength of these a person might go amber hunting. The income so accruing to Prussia was very large, and it is perhaps even greater since the "fishery" became practically vested in one firm. It runs the whole concern, and to that end it employs about two thousand people. It has its own railway from Fischäusen to Palminicken, a church for the workers, and, in fine, the colony is self-supporting and self-contained. No doubt the precious stuff may still be secured, to some extent, by dredging from boats. The serious effort, however, is made after the boats have discovered the spots where the amber is embedded. Divers make search until

they find a blue loam, which in itself is of great value, and which is claimed as a prerequisite by the Prussian Government. This loam—evidently a remnant also of the Baltic pines—points to the presence of amber in paying quantities. So a tunnel is forthwith driven from the shore, and regular mining proceeds. Again, branch tunnels go forth from the main bore, and much of this coast has a perfect network of burrows.

Naturally enough, I remarked on the good fortune which had given Prussia so much wealth in amber. "Yes," was Mr. Weingott's comment, "it's a pity that on the English coast we should just have enough to make us long for more. There appears to be a continual leakage of the material through the Sound

and the Cattegat into the North Sea. Who can tell how long a period may be needed for the drift of a lump of amber from the Baltic, say to Lowestoft, where I bought a piece I have at this moment?" He gave it me to inspect, and it was rolled to the smooth, round shape which we associate with a pebble picked up on the beach. If it could only have told its adventures from their beginning! "We are always glad," I was told, "to secure English amber, because it is only the best sorts that survive the long heave across. In other words, most bits of amber have cracks in them, and the fewer the cracks the better they stand this journey. One of the arts of the trade—namely, the preparation of the raw material—is to know

exactly how deep a crack goes. That obviously means everything, since the thing is to get a cutting which shall have no blemish. Amber is cheap enough in small fragments, as witness the brooches, made up of these, which you can buy for a shilling or eighteenpence. Oh, yes, they are genuine amber, although often folks wonder, 'How so cheap, then?' The cost arises when you want enough of the stuff to make,



SOME AMBER CURIOS.

perhaps, a cigarette-holder. Those all-prevalent cracks must be absent."

He brought forth another chunk from his collection, and observed, "Now, you see that crack?" The stone was in two halves, and as he lifted these from each other I saw that the division had been made absolutely where the crack ended. "X-rays!" I exclaimed, but he stopped me with a "No, they are no good. Simply you get to know by instinct—I have no other explanation—where a crack ends. It's a kind of second sight, which carries all the difference between wasting a stone and making the best of it."

When you talk you digress, and when you are the historian of a talk you ought to digress, always returning in season to your subject,

which here was the amber treasure trove cast up upon the East Coast of England.

"The odd fact," Mr. Weingott continued,



TRIPLE ROW NECKLET AND BRACELET OF OLD GREEK DESIGN.

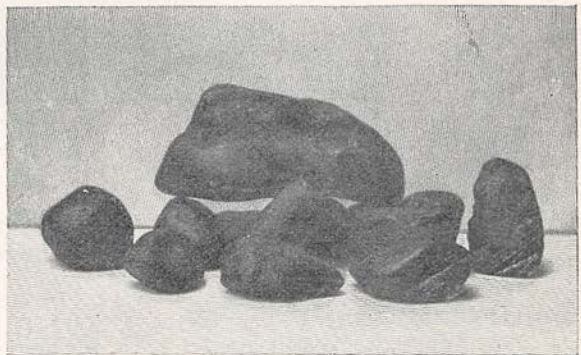
(Faceted round Leads found in Asia Minor; estimated age about 2,500 years.)

"is that the favourite coast line is comparatively short. It lies between the Wash and the Thames, or it might be more accurate to take it as from Hunstanton to Harwich. Amber has been found as far round as Dungeness, but not in any quantity. At Aldeburgh and Orford Ness a regular outlook is kept for it on the foreshores. In country houses in Norfolk and Suffolk, you will generally find an interest manifested in the subject of amber, often small collections. This must be attributable to the fact that amber has always been in evidence on these coasts.

"So much for the chief amber supply of modern times; only," said Mr. Weingott, "the ancients courted this dainty growth." He held up a necklace of amber beads, with the inquiry, "What do you think of it?" Being the complete novice, I could only answer, "It looks very beautiful." "Notice their beautiful ruby colour," he commented, telling the beads; "a colour such as is very rare in amber. Hold them against the light, thus, and they shine a maze of pretty colours. So far as I am aware, there is no other amber relic to match this. Haven't any idea what the value might be, but if you were to offer me £200 for the necklace, I should decline." In olden times amber was probably found in the isles of Greece; also there was a Sicilian amber. A native of the

near East—the Greek and the Turk especially—had a real veneration for amber. A Turkish pasha would lay up treasure by purchasing it, and in this he would also be obeying an innate religious instinct. Among other items of interest I was afforded the sight of a cigar-holder measuring over nine inches in length. Ah, to be a pasha with spare hours, good cigars, and that tube of amber—only the pashas mostly smoke cigarettes. Flawless, one longest piece Mr. Weingott had come across, worth six-and-twenty golden sovereigns—there's consolation for the average smoker to put in his pipe!

"But as to the whole natural distribution of amber," Mr. Weingott returned, "let me recall that barbarous African tribes have been discovered wearing it as ornaments: Moreover, in Finland and Lapland there is a fetish as to the curative virtues of oil-amber. Rub this handful of beads, and you will derive an oily feeling from them. Exactly! The Finns and Lapps believe that oil-amber cures rheumatism, neuralgia and kindred troubles. I had a lady call and ask me for the loan of this string, because her baby was teething!" Mr. Weingott did lend it, but for himself he was sceptical as to the medical qualities. One thing, though, was beyond doubt, and that was the attractive power of amber. This had been realised by the ancient Greeks long before the principle of the magnet was thought about. Their word for amber was *elektron*, and many a Greek would have rubbed a fragment in order to behold it pick up paper.



NATURAL BLOCKS OF AMBER.

(The largest was found in a trawl net off Lowestoft.)

The Baltic, as was pointed out, is not good to Russia in this business of amber. Still, Russia has some of the mineral—or vegetable-mineral, as you will—and that far

inland. In Central Russia there is an earth-amber, and Mr. Weingott reasoned that the salt sea must have been there at a period even more remote than the tertiary epoch. He had evidence to confirm this in the fact that tiny bubbles of salt water were to be discovered on cutting open a block of earth-amber. The smell of the sea had been hermetically sealed up all these æons of years, just as the scent of pine-wood remained a permanent possession of all amber. The Russian earth-amber is of a whitish hue, and in any case would find few patrons in England. Our taste, it appears, is for clouded amber, that of France is less fixed, while Belgium, Denmark, and Holland will have a clear yellow amber. The reference here is to the smoker's armoury, and so the question naturally arose, "Why the kinship between tobacco and amber?"

"If you think the matter out," Mr. Weingott remarked, "you will readily enough understand it. You cannot destroy amber by dissolving it, unless you resort to an exhaustive scientific process. Nor will anything sink into amber; it is absolutely non-porous. You wash out an amber mouthpiece, and all the nicotine is gone. Further, amber is one of the best non-conductors of heat. Therefore you have a pure smoke and a cool smoke—those to a degree which nothing but amber will give."

We gossiped as to the general purposes of ornament to which amber is devoted.

Mr. Weingott rather took my breath away when he ejaculated, "Single eye-glasses!" The nice young gentlemen about town had opened out a fashion of the sort. Did an eye-glass of thin amber help the sight a great deal? "As much as any other eye-glass," was the cryptic reply I received. Anyhow, an amber eye-glass would be cool-

wearing—*vide* smoking? Very cool-wearing! The perfect exquisite might try for a single eye-glass with a fly in the centre of it. True, the amber has to be cut so thin that the air might reach the fly. In that case the creature whisks into a fleck of dust. Yet the effort is worth making, for the eye-glass would be regal.

To the illustrations of interesting specimens of amber which I obtained direct from Mr. Weingott's valuable collection, I have since been able to add one showing the massive amber



From a photo by]

[Window & Grove, Baker Street, W.

MISS ELLEN TERRY AS "IMOGEN," WITH NECKLACE OF SUFFOLK COAST AMBER.

necklace worn by Miss Ellen Terry in the character of *Imogen*, in the Lyceum revival of Shakespeare's "Cymbeline." This ornament was made of amber from the Suffolk coast, by Mr. G. Norris, the well-known amber collector of Aldeburgh. The original design for the necklet was made by Mr. Alma Tadema, but, at Mr. Norris's suggestion, the square edges and flat surfaces of the ancient ornament which had inspired Mr. Tadema were discarded in favour of the rounded formation typical of the amber trophies of the East Coast.