

Pearl Fishing Metropolis of Southern Pacific

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THURSDAY ISLAND, Torres Strait, South Pacific Ocean, July 3.—(Special Correspondence of The Bee.)—Have you ever heard of Thursday Island? It is the metropolis of the pearl-fishing industry of the Pacific ocean. The seas about it are spotted with banks of pearl oysters and hundreds of divers are always moving about through them. They bring back tons of valuable shells and often pearls of great price. Already millions of dollars' worth of shells and pearls have been gathered, and still there are fortunes in sight. The same business is going on off the coast of western Australia, where \$500,000 worth of shells are annually raised and where some shells are found worth \$1,000 a ton. A pearl, discovered there a few years ago, sold for \$7,500, and another one found in 1890 brought \$10,000.

On Thursday Island.

But first let me tell you just where Thursday Island is and of my strange trip to it. If you will take your map of the Pacific ocean you will see, just north of Australia, the enormous island of New Guinea, which is, not counting Australia, the largest island of the world. It is about 1,500 miles long and in places more than 400 miles wide. This great mass lies within eighty miles of Australia and the strait between the two is spotted with islands and coral reefs. There are hundreds of islands, some inhabited by strange tribes, others mere coral rocks jutting out of the sea and others half-settled by Australians. There are islands for every day of the week. There is a Sunday island, a Monday island, a Tuesday island and a Thursday island. When we came into the harbor we were told we must go to Friday island for quarantine and we sailed by other islands later on before we came to Thursday island.

In coming to Thursday island from Brisbane, Queensland, I had one of the wonderful trips of the world. The most of the way was inside the Great Barrier reef, which is made altogether of coral. Suppose you could construct a wall of coral from Boston to the Mississippi river, or so that the length of it should be at least 1,200 miles. Suppose the wall to be from ten to seventy miles wide and to be made entirely of coral; now in atolls, great rings or coral walls encircling lagoons; now in long ridges and now in gardens and beds of most beautiful red, white and pink flowers of coral, built by these insects of the seas. Such a wall is the Great Barrier reef, which extends along the whole eastern coast of Australia from Torres strait southward for more than 1,200 miles. At Rockhampton, several hundred miles above Brisbane, the reef is a hundred miles from the coast, but as a general thing the distance between it and the shore varies between



CORAL GARDEN ON THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

polyps. The coral was in sight much of the way to Thursday island and it gave us some idea of the enormous coral formation of this part of the globe.

Where the Pearl Shells Lie.

Thursday island commands Torres strait. The British government is building fortifications upon it and it now has a garrison on a hill back of the harbor. It has six-inch guns already mounted and it expects to establish a big coaling station here to aid it in defending its possessions in this part of the world.

Thursday island is one of the smallest in the strait, but owing to its excellent harbor it is the port of call of all ships going through. Vessels of any size can anchor in its waters and be safe and the result is that all the steamers which go about North Australia to Europe stop here. There are also steamers for Japan, China, the Philippines and other parts of Asia, as well as vessels for New Guinea and the islands of the South seas.

Through its commerce and the pearl fish-

ing industry there are Filipinos, Japanese, Chinese, East Indians, Fijians and Papuans. More than half of the population is semi-savage and among the floating population are pearl divers, beach combers and beach-crozier fishermen of all colors and races.

The Great Barrier Reef.

It is in the coral islands and the lagoons that the best pearl shells are found. The oysters which produce these shells are not like our oysters. They grow to an enormous size and the shells are often as big as a tin wash basin. Sometimes they are eighteen inches from one side to the other, a single pair of shells spread out measuring a yard in diameter. Until recently there was a law that none could be exported which was under six inches in diameter and at present the average weight of a pair of shells is about two pounds.

The shells lie in the bottom of the sea and they are also fastened to the rocks, especially to the coral rocks. Oysters do not like sand or dirt and they will not thrive where the tide moves the sand about. Within the past few years an attempt has

Australia annually and the output from Thursday island is even larger. There are pearl fishing stations scattered about within 100 miles of this point, and 250 boats and luggers are constantly engaged in the business.

Many tons of shells are found in others of the South Sea islands. The Tuamotu group has already produced about \$5,000,000 worth of them, having exported something like 25,000 tons of shells to Europe, and there are other islands almost as rich. It is said that the Tuamotu beds are almost exhausted, but if left alone the oysters grow rapidly, and a fishery will reproduce itself in seven years.

The shells are worth from \$500 to \$1,000 per ton for the better quality, and even the smaller shells of the poorer species bring from \$75 to \$300 per ton. There are ships which go from island to island and buy the shells from the savages, trading tobacco, calico and other goods for them. They give as high as from \$60 to \$100 per ton, but this is for stuff that will sell in London for about ten times as much.

Among the Divers.

There are hundreds of pearl divers here at Thursday island. Among the best are the Japanese, who will stay longer under water and risk more than anyone else. There are many natives from the South seas and also Danes, Swedes and Malays, but the proprietors of the ships say the Japanese are the best and that the others are always pretending to be sick.

The fishing is done in small boats or luggers. The boats go out in fleets of one large

boat of, say 100 tons, and several small ones. The smaller boats are for the divers. Each boat has a pumping apparatus to force air into the diving dresses when the men are under the surface and also other machinery. The small boat costs about \$2,000, so that the business is by no means a cheap one.

Before going down into the water the men put on diving dresses to which air pipes or tubes are attached. They are first clad in thick flannel and then in these dresses with metal heads, so framed at the front with glass that the diver can see out. Each diver wears boots soled with plates of copper or lead. The weight he carries is usually about 100 pounds, but sometimes less. Often there are twenty-eight pounds on each boot, and it is important in using down the diver keep his feet below him. If he should lose his balance and turn over or his boots should fall off his legs might fly up in the air. If one boot falls off that leg will bob up in the air and he must as far as possible keep all the weight under him. If he is searching for shells at the bottom of the sea he must straddle them and stoop down.

Every diver carries a bag with a draw string in it. He fills his bag with shells and then jerks the signal line, and is pulled up. The shells are counted and weighed and he is paid according to what he has found, some men making much more than others. There is one diver who has gathered 1,000 pairs of shells in one day, but half this number is good work.

Dangers of Pearl Fishing.

The business is very dangerous. There are sharks and poisonous fish and squid. The sharks follow the luggers, attracted by the pieces of salt beef, which are now and then thrown from the boats. They do not trouble the divers without they are naked except when very hungry, and if they come near the diver can open an escape valve in his suit and make a noise which usually scares them away. As a rule the divers are not afraid of the sharks, but they do not spear fish or other animals at the bottom of the sea without first ascertaining whether there are sharks about, for the dead fish would surely attract them.

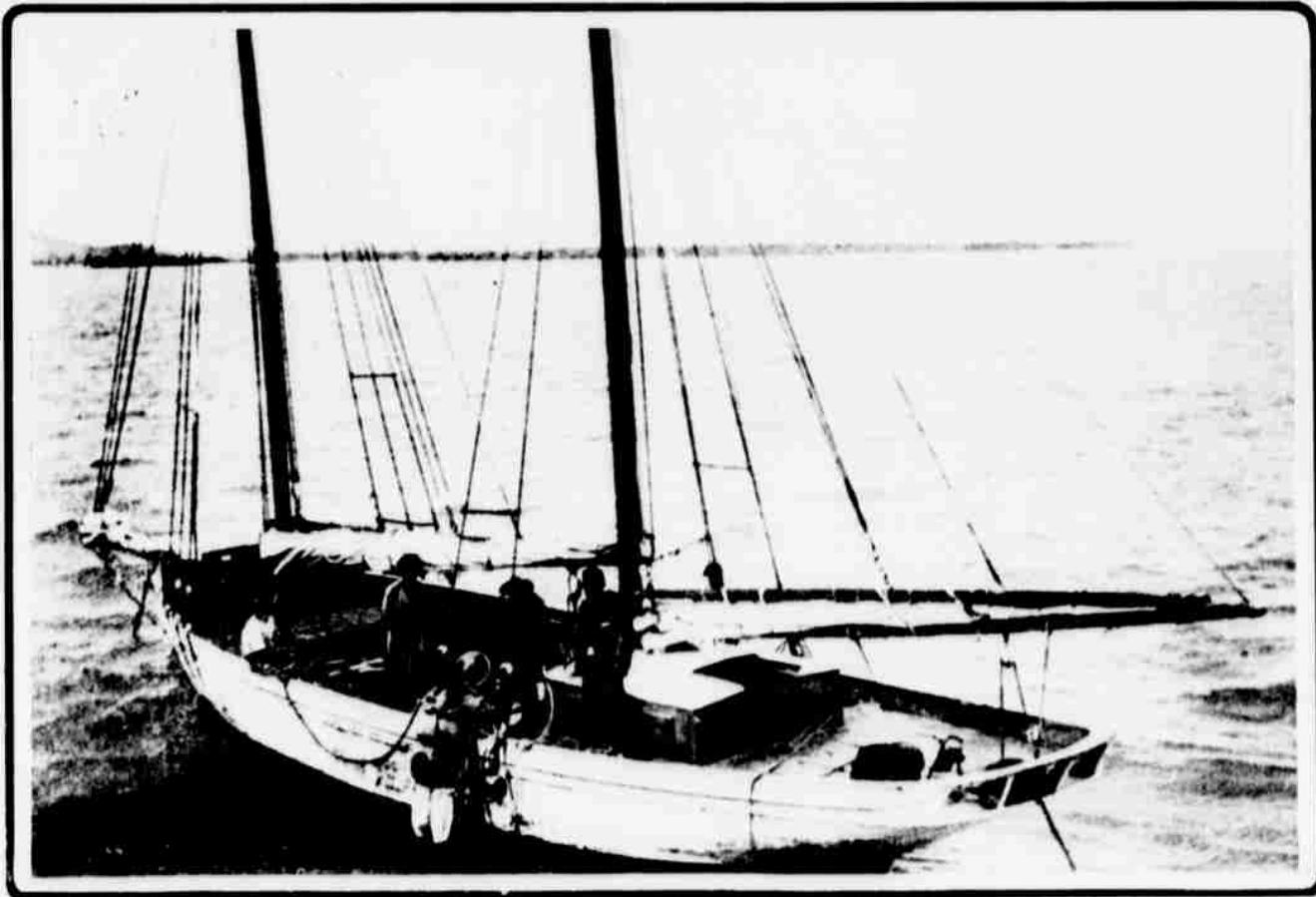
Another danger is the yell or great squid. This marine monster has long arms which he fastens upon anything within his reach. If disturbed he vomits out an inky fluid which discolors the waters about him and the diver is liable to be bewildered in the gloom and to fall against the rocks.

In the native fisheries much of the diving is done by the women, who go down without diving suits. They fasten stones to their feet to enable them to sink, but do not plug up their nostrils and ears as do the pearl divers of India.

Finding the Pearls.

The pearl fishing companies of Thursday island are extremely careful in opening the shells. No one can tell whether an oyster may not contain a hundred-dollar or a thousand-dollar pearl, and the pearls are so small they can be easily stolen. The opening is done with a knife much like a common table knife, with a thin, flexible blade and strong handle. A good operator can open a ton of shells in a day and not miss a pearl. White men will never let

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PEARLING LUGGER, WITH DIVERS IN THE FOREGROUND

five and fifteen miles and it was within this channel that our steamer, guided by its pilot, plowed its way.

At times we were close to the Australian shore, coasting a dry and thirsty land, as dreary as the arid plateaus of the Rockies, and again we were moving along by these great rings of coral, which floated, as it were, on the face of the green sea. Some of the atolls had vegetation upon them, the round basins being circled with cocoanut trees, while others were bare rock, to be seen only at low tide.

The air was wonderfully clear and the sky a heavenly blue, with a few clouds in it, which made great patches of dark blue velvet on the dreary gray of the mountains of the mainland. The water was as smooth as a mill pond. We were steaming, as it were, through a great canal, one wall of which was the rocks of the continent of Australia and the other that built up by the countless millions of the coral

eries a considerable town has grown up about the harbor. There are several hundred buildings and the Queensland government, which controls the island, has a number of public offices, such as a court house, a customs house, a post and telegraph office and a savings bank. The biggest house of the town is that of the governor, standing on a little hill at one end, with a flagstaff on its roof. Near by are the barracks, great two-story buildings with galleries around them, looking not unlike our second-class seaside hotels. In front of the town two piers have been built out into the harbor for the accommodation of the smaller steamers and back of these are the warehouses and stores. The town has six hotels and three or four churches. Its inhabitants come from all parts of the Pacific. As you step on the wharf you are surrounded by representatives of all the nations of the far east. There are brown men, black men and

been made to raise them artificially in a cove in Friday island, but it has not succeeded. The oysters seem to like the coral formations. Where they fasten themselves to such rocks they grow to great size. There are many caverns in the reefs and they will attach themselves to the roofs of these submarine caves, a dozen joining themselves together and hanging, as it were, by one set of threads. The fastening by which they are held to the rocks is much like a tassel, consisting of a cordage or muscle that extends out near the hinge of the shell, and then branches off in multitudinous threads, each of which alights itself, as it were, to the rock. The diver cuts the thread and thus gets off the shells.

Millions in Shells.

Most of the money in pearl fishing comes from the oyster shell, not the pearl. A half million dollars' worth of shells are taken from two fishing grounds of northwestern

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