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## TOWARD MANHOOD!

The boy, against his father's wishes, joined an expedition to Laysan Island, a remote Pacific atoll where five species of birds faced extinction.

There, amid the fascination of nature's outpost, the boy discovered both the bounty and the cruelty of nature. The creatures of the island—birds, seals, huge turtles, rabbits—are born, thrive, and die on the Pacific atoll. The boy grows, too. And in learning the lessons taught by nature the boy becomes a man.

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# CERTAIN ISLAND

by ROBERT MURPHY

author of THE POND

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CERTAIN ISLAND Robert Murphy

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The small expedition to Laysan Island with which this novel is concerned actually took place. The island can be found on the map at the location given, and the background of history and birdlife is true. But the characters and events set forth are imaginary. The young man who made the trip bears some outward resemblance to Alfred M. Bailey, who is now the Director of the Denver Museum of Natural History. Dr. Bailey was born in Iowa and several of his boyhood adventures suggested a few of the things that occur in the book, but that is all. Dr. Bailey is not Geordie nor were Geordie's problems his, any more



than the other characters in the novel are the actual people who went to Laysan.

When I was first thinking of the book, I went to see Dr. Bailey. He and his family were most hospitable and generous in providing me with notes, diaries and museum publications, some of which are now out of print, containing Dr. Bailey's articles and pictures relative to the trip he had made so long ago. Without this help I doubt that the skeleton of *A CERTAIN ISLAND* would ever have been formed, and I am most grateful to them all.

*Robert Murphy*  
*Westtown, Pennsylvania*

## **A CERTAIN ISLAND**



cook, and have to deal with turtles, fish, and whatever supplies they give us that will last ten weeks or so without refrigeration. It might be a good thing to have a conference with that Ingrid, and make up a list of spices and whatnot that you'll need. It will be a long swim to the nearest store."

"If you think I can cook well enough."

"No false modesty. You're a master chef, my boy. I still remember that stew on the opening day. In fact, that's what got me interested in you—that and the fact that you skin birds well. You'll work like the deuce, poor fellow."

"I sure worried about that stew. I wanted you to be impressed."

"You were scheming even then?"

"Yes, sir."

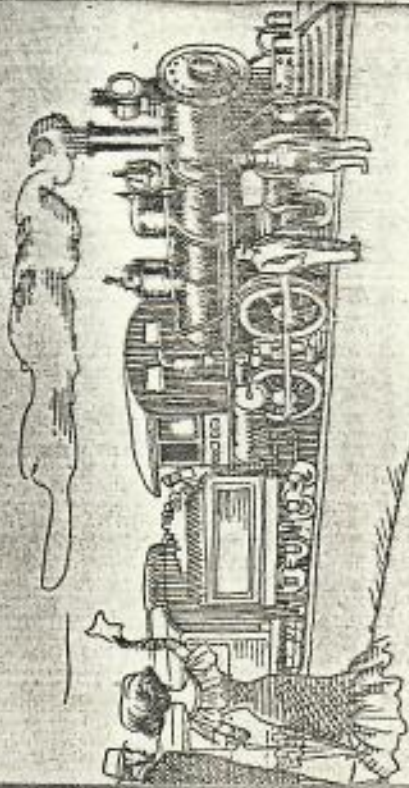
"It seems to run in the family," Doc said obscurely. "Well, off you go. I'll see you later."

Geordie went along to see Dr. Black, whom he found skinning a beautifully marked snowy owl.

"Thought I'd better attend to it myself," Dr. Black said, straightening up and putting his scalpel down. "It's the handsomest one I've ever seen. Came from up around the northern end of the state somewhere. You look pleased with yourself this morning."

"I'm going to Laysan," Geordie said. "My father told me last night I could go."

Dr. Black solemnly shook hands with him. "Congratulations," he said. "May it be the first of a lifetime of expeditions. I had heard that this was in the wind, but I didn't want to speak prematurely. I think that I'll give you a copy of the order for materials that should meet you in San Francisco. You can double check Sat. If he doesn't lose his list, that is."



## THIRTEEN

The next morning Geordie hurried to Doc's office and forgot to knock before he pushed open the door. Doc was sitting surrounded with papers, and looked up. "I can go!" Geordie said. "My father's going to let me go."

Doc stood up, and they shook hands. "Geordie, I'm delighted. I'll have a list for you in a day or two of the things you're to take. You and I will be leaving two weeks from tomorrow. We'll meet the rest of the crowd in San Francisco and go to Honolulu on an Army transport. You'd better go see Black." He smiled. "Oh," he said, and stuck his finger out. "You may be the camp



the beach among the black-footed albatrosses—black gonies—that were scattered about. It was still strange to Geordie to have birds calmly move off only a few steps and watch him go by. Many of them didn't move at all. One that they stopped in front of had apparently just laid its egg, and when they stooped before it the bird got up, bent over, and touched the egg with its beak as though to point with pride to what it had accomplished.

They took pictures of it and went on to the little freshwater pond in the island's southwest corner. There was bunch grass in this vicinity and a few Laysan rails were running about in it; two ducks, dusky, with dark faces and white patches around their eyes, were swimming in the middle of the pond. They didn't fly and only moved a little further toward the far shore.

"They're awfully tame," Geordie said, and then recognized them. "They're Laysan teal! Now I've seen all five species of Laysan's birds! Doc, do you think that these are all that's left of them? They can't be down to two."

"I certainly hope not. There were less than a hundred when I was here before, and we were worried then. Even at that, they were the rarest duck in the world. But only two . . . I can't believe it. You'd better make a project of getting here frequently to see if you can see more."

"Yes, sir."

"John was intending to collect a pair or two, but I'll have to call him off that. We have a few skins back home, and we'll give him a couple of those."

"Last night, when I said something about his being seasick all the time he didn't like it. I guess I shouldn't have said it."

"You were certainly within your rights," Doc said, "but as closely associated as we are, and will be for six weeks or so, I think you'd better go easy with him. He was always a difficult fellow, and seemed to think he was

better than anyone else and up on a little pedestal, but this time he's worse than usual. I don't think he's well, and being shaken up on the trip and not eating enough to keep a snake alive hasn't been good for him. Be patient, and offer to help him if the chance comes up. You'll probably be rebuffed, but just let it go."

"I'm sorry I talked back to him."

"Don't be sorry. Think no more about it."

They started to walk again, and came out on the wide south beach. The gray-backed terns were preparing to nest there soon, and there were legions of them; presently there would be more coming in from the sea. They swooped and dove at Doc and Geordie, tame and noisy; there were one or two pretty fairy terns among them, for they also liked that beach, and the two men moved through them as through a playful, living storm. A little further to the east, where the number of terns thinned out and the offshore reef ended, they came upon a sea turtle that must have weighed three hundred pounds. They hauled it out on the beach and grunted and heaved until they had turned it over on its back, where it lay waving its flippers.

"We'll come back later and collect some steaks," Doc said. "The tide's going out, and the old girl won't be able to get on her feet until it comes in again." He pointed north, up the beach. "There will be a lot of black gonies up there, but let's cut over to the lagoon now."

They started up the little rise behind the beach and as they got into the thin vegetation and scattered low scaevola brush they began to run into rabbits again. They were everywhere, seemingly as thick on the ground as the birds were in the air, and Doc and Geordie shot until their guns were almost too hot to hold and they had to stop for awhile.

A few more steps took them high enough to see the



their demolished tunnels with him, and after a good deal of dusty rolling about he got back onto solid footing and watched where he was going thereafter.

"So that's where they go in the daytime," he said, when he got his breath back. "They've scared me at night, but I didn't expect they'd try to bury me during the day."

"You'll fall into their burrows once in a while," Doc said. "Everybody does. You can't always be sure where they are, and you'll have your mind on something else and down you'll go. They'll start to lay pretty soon and be quieter at night, and then the shearwaters will get here and make even more noise. I must admit that birds that live in holes during the day and raise the devil at night seem very queer to me. I can't get used to it."

They went on, shooting rabbits along the way, and finally found Cap on the island's highest point near the northern beach. It was only about twenty-five feet high, but it gave a fine view over the sea where the surf was the most beautiful; Cap was sitting pensively on top of the little hill watching it, and started when they joined him.

"I had gotten to feeling that I was the only man here," he said. "Robinson Crusoe facing the empty sea. Ships practically never come this way. I doubt we'll see one while we're here, except KITTIWAKE when she stops back."

Geordie didn't know that KITTIWAKE was coming back. "She's coming here?" he asked. "I thought she went home."

"She was going to Midway to have a look, and she'll stop in on her way back to Honolulu. But she won't stay more than an hour or so. After that we'll be marooned. Want to go home on her?"

"No, sir," Geordie said. "I like being marooned here."

"We might as well start back," Doc said. "We've got a

turtle turned over on the east side, and it will take a while to butcher it. Have you seen John?"

"He went by here an hour or two ago. I guess he's gone back to skin his bird."

As they started out Doc said: "Do you think we'd better ask him if he feels well enough to stay? I was saying to Geordie awhile ago that he didn't seem very well."

"He'd take it as a criticism," Cap said. "He doesn't seem well to me either, but maybe it was the trip. Anyhow, how do you ask him? He'll say for sure that we're trying to get rid of him, and steal all the glory."

Doc threw up his hands, and they went on around the beach to the east, passing the big colony of black gonies and the area of great boulders at the edge of the beach that Doc said harbored crayfish, and came to the turtle again. They were bloodied to the elbows when they'd finished, and took a swim to get clean once more before they cut around the edge of the lagoon to cross the island to the cottage with their steaks. When they were nearly home Geordie discovered that he was still carrying the flying fish that the frigate bird had contributed. They were dried out and seemed very unappetizing; Geordie decided that he would get more some other time, when he was coming straight back from the lagoon, and buried these in the sand. When they reached the cottage they all wrote down the number of rabbits they had shot on the board that Cap had hung up that morning. The total added up to one hundred eighty-six.

The turtle steaks were delicious, and even Catton complimented Geordie on them. "Really quite good, I must say."

"Thank you," Geordie said, surprised, and recalling Doc's advice added: "I'd like to help you skin some of the birds you collected today, if you want me to."

Catton's face took on a look of suspicion. "Why?" he





"Merry Christmas!" Doc repeated. "Did you forget what day it is?"

"I guess I did for the moment," Geordie said. "It still doesn't seem like that time of year."

"Cap brought a bottle of wine along for Christmas dinner. We'll have to do something special."

"I ought to make a cake," Geordie said. "I would if I had enough eggs."

"We'll have plenty of eggs later, when the terns nest. They nest on the south beach and an unusually high tide always washes their eggs away. When they lay again all the eggs are fresh, but I wouldn't know how to find fresh eggs anywhere now. I guess we'll have to settle for more turtle steaks."

"They were good. I'll go around the island this morning and see if I can find a turtle."

"Do that," Doc said. "The rest of us are going to plant the rest of the trees. We'll excuse you."

Geordie went around to the kitchen, and in company with two rails that ran about his feet cooked breakfast; after it was eaten he started for the freshwater pond. The air was full of birds coming in from the sea, for they fed early upon the squid that left the surface a little after dawn. He shot ten rabbits on the way and found eight ducks on the pond. Three of them were mallards, and flew off; he was surprised to see them there, and they reminded him of home. The other five were Laysan teal. He was very pleased to know that there were at least three more of them, and they seemed so tame that he decided to see if he could get them closer, remembering from his reading that they were inquisitive birds and recalled a trick Possum had once showed him, to entice them closer. He lay down on his belly in the bunch grass with his camera in front of him, and waved his feet in the air.

## SEVENTEEN

The sun was shining when Geordie awoke the next morning; he dressed, and when he went into the living room there were several miller birds, finches, and a single honey eater busily flitting about. It was such a cheerful scene, so lively and normal, that the air of gloom at bedtime the night before seemed far away. Doc was sitting at the table with a piece of paper before him, drawing what appeared to be a plan; a miller bird landed on his shoulder and began to sing, and he looked up and grinned.

"Merry Christmas!" he said.

Geordie stared at him. "What?" he asked.



The teal swam back and forth and craned their necks; soon they began to move in. They came closer and closer, while Geordie held his breath. When he finally took several pictures of them they were only a few feet away. He stood up and moved off, quite pleased with himself, for he doubted that anyone had ever been so close to them before. He could develop the pictures after dinner and they would be a fine Christmas present to Doc.

As he walked toward the south beach he felt to thinking of home again and the activities of the season, the presents and the Christmas tree and people coming in rosy from the cold and the house fragrant with Ingrid's cooking, and of his mother and father. For a long moment he felt very lonely for all the things that were so far away, and then he came into the great cloud of terns and was so engaged by their airy multitude that he cheered up again. He decided to make a day of it alone even if he did find a turtle quickly, and went on.

As luck would have it he found a medium-sized turtle before he had gone very far. He turned it over and butchered it because the tide was coming in, cut out his steaks, and carrying them up the crest of the beach buried them deep in the sand to be picked up again later. He had a pleasant swim to clean himself up and went along the beach until he came to a big nesting colony of black goniats. This was their favorite nesting beach, which they liked more than the lagoon. There were thousands of them gathered there, many sitting on eggs, others without eggs sitting or wandering about. They were noisy, as usual, and some of them were dozing with their heads on their backs. Geordie sat down several feet from one of them, which looked at him calmly with its dark eyes, and he thought to learn to take care of themselves, wandering on enough to learn to take care of themselves, wandering on their narrow seven-foot wings over the trackless ocean as far as the Aleutians and back to find their island again.

The life of the colony went on around him. Birds took off for the sea, running and flapping for long distances before they were airborne, and others came in; there wasn't much wind, and most of these made clumsy landings, sometimes pitching forward and falling all over themselves. When they did this they would get up, collect themselves, look rather embarrassed, and waddle off; beautiful in the air, they were quite awkward on land. Presently another bird came in and waddled over to the one Geordie was near. It was the other one of the pair, come to relieve its mate after several days at sea. They made a ceremony of the changeover, touching beaks and talking to each other. The one on the egg was reluctant to leave, putting its head down mournfully; it was finally gently pushed off by the other, waddled away, and took to the air. Now that it had finally given up the egg, it might not return for eighteen or twenty days, during which time the bird on the egg would neither eat nor drink.

Geordie had lost track of the time, but the sun was getting higher and he decided to move on and spend some time with the Laysan albatrosses and other birds before going back to the cottage. He stood up, and turning away from the beach climbed the slight rise toward the middle of the island. The stunted bushes began and there seemed to be rabbits under all of them; he started to shoot them again. The little flightless rails ran about, he had to be careful not to break through into the numerous petrel burrows, and high over his head the rakish frigate birds were soaring on the warming air; they usually robbed the boobies in the early mornings and late afternoons. He decided to visit their roosting section later, on the way back, to collect some flying fish as an extra course at dinner, and went on to the portulaca flats around the lagoon.

The Laysan albatrosses, which outnumbered the black-



footed ones, were nested in droves on the western side of the lagoon. There was a flock of a hundred or so golden plovers, which nested on the Alaskan tundra and spent the winter on Laysan, on the open beach near the water; they didn't trust him and flew at his approach, whistling their lonely cries. There were a few bristle-thighed curlews too, also northern nesters, birds with long, down-curved bills, that were tamer. He came among the albatrosses and sat down again.

Unlike the black goniates, which only made slight depressions in the sand, the white birds built up their nests a little. Occasionally one of them would reach out, pick up a beakful of sand, and then pat it into the low walls with the side of the beak. The one nearest Geordie had a few weatherbeaten old bones around it, all that remained of a bird or two that had been killed long ago by the feather hunters. Many of them napped, and the unmated wandered idly about; presently, thirty or forty yards away, two of them began to dance.

They drew close together with great solemnity, bowing and almost stamping their feet, and circled facing each other, continuing to bow. They fenced a little with their beaks, whetting them upon each other; one of them raised a wing and nibbled at the feathers beneath it. The other bird stood like a statue while this was going on, and snapped its long hooked beak five or six times. The first bird stopped its nibbling, pointed its beak at the sky, rose up on its toes, puffed itself up, and gave a long, ridiculous, nasal groan; the other snapped its beak loudly and repeatedly. They both paused for a moment and began to bow rapidly to each other again.

It seemed as though they were going to go through the performance again and Geordie remembered his camera. He got up and approached them for a picture, but they didn't want their picture taken; they broke off their dance and separated and wandered away. Geordie was

disappointed and waited for a time for another pair to begin, but none of them did; he finally decided that he would have to wait for another day. He threaded his way between them, pausing to pat one particularly benign-looking one, and continued around the north end of the lagoon to the frigate bird roost.

A number of these black pirates were sitting about on the stunted bushes and they looked at him calmly; Geordie was surprised to see several boobies nested on the ground immediately beneath them, and then decided that was the safest place for the boobies' young. The frigates couldn't get down through the bushes at them to pick the young boobies up when they hatched. Several of the frigates had big crops, and following Doc's procedure of the day before he found a stick and tapped them. As before, they regurgitated their fish, and Geordie collected a dozen good-sized ones, strung them on a stick, and walked back to the east beach and started along it for the cottage.

A fairy tern appeared above him and hovered, its wings translucent against the brilliant sky, the very picture of airiness and grace; then it dropped down in front of his face and hung staring at him with its big dark eyes, so close that he dropped his fish and raised his hand and caught it. It didn't struggle but lay quietly in his hand for a moment, a lovely bit of life, and as it rested there its mate came and hovered above Geordie's head and he let his captive go. He thought that they might be nested somewhere nearby, and decided that he would come back some day soon to see if he could find the nest.

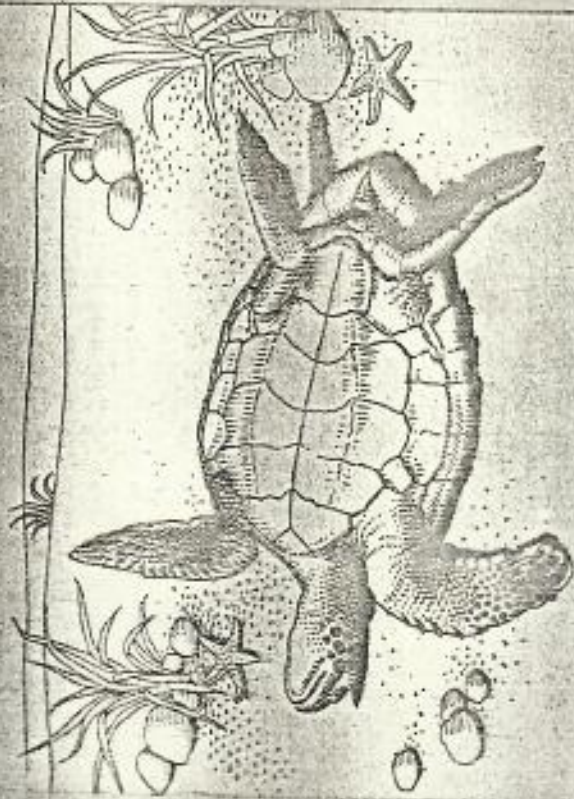
He went along a little below the top of the ridge on the lagoon side, shooting rabbits as he went, recovered the turtle steaks, and cut around the end of the lagoon to the cottage. The surf on the reef and the changing colors of the ocean as the water deepened were beautiful. As he stood for a long moment looking out toward the empty



omous look and the fact that Catton had been trailing him about and watching him, as well as the man's accusation that he had been brought along as an accomplice to underworld maneuvers, upset him a good deal. The accusation was so false as to be unbalanced, and Geordie had never had any dealings with unbalanced people; he didn't know how to estimate them or what they might do.

He and Doc sat on the front steps until Cap and Catton came back. Catton went into the house without looking at anyone; Cap sat down with them.

"There were five teal there," Cap said, "so I think we've got that business quieted down." He looked at Geordie for a moment, thoughtfully. "We'll have to . . ." he began, and broke off and turned to Doc. "I'd like to talk to you a little about all this later."



## NINETEEN

In the morning, Doc and Geordie went off to the fairy tern's nest, to get more pictures. Geordie was rather silent; he had thought a good deal about Catton in the night, and had gotten nowhere. As they walked along the western beach Doc, who had been rather quiet too, finally broke the silence.

"Cap and I took a walk after you'd gone to your room," he said. "We're both disturbed about that affair yesterday, for John got you involved in it."

"He doesn't like me," Geordie said. "He hasn't liked me from the first."



male's green scapulars rose like bristles, and both birds puffed themselves up, trembled, and finally mated on the nest.

Geordie turned away presently and started back. He hoped that now the frigates had started nesting he would be able to get pictures of their antics. To make better time he went out onto the beach. The tide was very low, lower than he had ever seen it, and he went out and poked about the boulders that were usually awash; in the deep pools around them he could see many big crayfish moving around but had no way to catch them; he thought of rigging up a long-handled net to be ready if the tide fell so low again. Further south he saw a flock of red phalaropes come in off the sea and head for the lagoon. All of the migrating birds should be increasing now, and more of the terns, both graybacks and noddies, should be coming in to nest. He turned over a big turtle on the beach near the end of the lagoon, and not having his knife with him cut across the island to get it and return.

Doc was sitting on the steps, with his rifle beside him; he'd been out shooting rabbits. "We've got him in bed," he said, to Geordie's inquiring look. "When we got him undressed we found his arms and legs all broken out. It's arsenical poisoning as sure as the devil. Cap's with him now; we're going to take turns."

"I'll take a turn too," Geordie said. "At least, I can holler if I need help or don't know what to do."

"No need for you to do it," Doc said. "I think we can keep you busy enough. Cap and I talked it over awhile ago. If John is laid up for long, or if he . . . doesn't make it, his collection will have to be filled. Cap can't skin a bird, and that will leave it up to you and me to collect and work up all the skins for John's university, the ones

we want, and the ones for the National Museum. We have rails to catch, pictures to take, some sets of eggs to collect, and rabbits to shoot. I looked on the board awhile ago, and to date we've shot close to three thousand of them and they're getting wilder all the time, so our average will probably go down from now on. We're a long, long way from cleaning them out, and we've only got about five more weeks to go. I'll be out of circulation part of the time and Cap can help with the rabbits when he's free, but you can see that you'll be doing a lot of work. I'm sorry, Geordie. It won't be quite as leisurely for any of us as we thought it would."

"It's been pretty easy so far," Geordie said. "It's been sort of like a vacation, with plenty of time to look around. I don't mind working a lot harder, Doc. I'd like to do it. I hope I can fix the skins well enough."

"You'll do," Doc said. "Let's go out and shoot some more rabbits."

"I have a turtle on the east beach. I've got to go butcher him."

"Get your rifle and put the plover away," Doc said. "I'll go along."

When they returned they found Cap sitting on the steps, and he got up and walked toward them. They all stopped a few yards from the cottage.

"He's very sick," Cap said. "We didn't always have a doctor handy on destroyers, so I had to know a little medicine, and we'll just have to do the best we can. I've been thinking about the situation and I've decided it would be best if you, Geordie, stayed away from him. It would be unpleasant for you to help us nurse him, and unnecessary, and it might stir him up. From one or two things he's mumbled I take it he still thinks about that business of the teal once in awhile. He's pretty confused