

## The Curious Duck

Jane Bachman

THERE was once a young duck who set out to search for the meaning of life, because, as he said, "I would like to be something more than a duck." Privately he thought that to be like all the rest of the ducks was quite humiliating.

"But how can I be other than a duck when I look so much like one?" he questioned.

The others only blinked and wondered why anyone would want to be anything else.

"Why am I a duck, and what am I supposed to do?" he wondered.

Henrik was his name, and he was not a very big duck so he knew right away he would have to be persistent. In Henrik's world, one had to make up for lack of size by knowing something—not a great deal—just enough to keep from being pecked.

He started his search one sunny June morning. The grass was growing splendidly, and the birds were joyous, so everything seemed right. Henrik knew that it would be difficult to make progress if the wind were blowing or the birds still.

The path was straight, but Henrik soon found the sun was warm, and he had to find an oak tree and rest awhile. Just as he was trying to make himself comfortable, he noticed an old dog sauntering down the path. The dog was getting grey, and Henrik supposed he was very wise. For if the old ones are not wise, what is to become of us?

"Am I on the right road?" asked the old dog before Henrik could speak.

"That all depends on where you're going," replied Henrik and fluffed up his wings ever so slightly.

"What has that to do with it?" asked the old dog.

"Why, everything." Henrik closed his bill with a snap.

"Are *you* on the right road?" The old dog tried to look straight ahead, but it was not much use for he had walked with his eyes on the path ever since he could remember.

"I'm not going anywhere in particular," said Henrik, "so it doesn't make any difference if I'm on the right road or not."

"Indeed," said the old dog. "Why, then it makes all the more difference. Otherwise you may get back where you started or you may take the wrong road."

"But how can there be a wrong road when I don't know where I'm going?" Henrik thought the dog very strange.

"I can't explain," sighed the other, "because I don't always know where I'm going either, but I'm sure there's a route laid out anyway. Am I on the right road?"

By this time, Henrik was becoming impatient and answered crossly, "I can see that you will not listen to reason, and so I am

going on. But first, do you know the meaning of life?"

"Nothing," sighed the old dog and yawned. "You'd better be on your way because I can see you have a lot to do."

"Yes," answered Henrik and started off again.

He had not gone far when he came to a little house set back from the road. The roof drooped at one corner, and one of the windows was cracked. Henrik wasn't sure if he should enter the gate, so he squeezed under it though it sagged horribly and ruffled up his feathers. Just as he was wiggling out, he heard a laugh, a high, tinkly laugh, and he looked around in astonishment. The laughter continued, and then Henrik saw a mouse rolling back and forth on the ground, holding its sides with its paws. Henrik stared. Soon the mouse sat up, wiped its eyes with a dandelion leaf which happened to be handy, and then, suppressing a chuckle, asked Henrik who he was.

Henrik drew himself up and explained, of course, that he was looking for the meaning of life, but that he could see he had come to the wrong place. This almost set the mouse off again but not quite. He stopped just in time and asked, "What makes you think you've come to the wrong place?"

"I didn't come to be laughed at," said Henrik. "I came to find an answer to my question. Do you know the answer or don't you?"

"I guess I don't." The mouse tittered and then added, "I hope you find it, but please, please push the gate open instead of trying to go under if you feel you must enter places like this, or I shall be hysterical. I know I shall."

Henrik did as he was told, but this was even funnier, and the last thing he heard as he waddled around a curve in the road was high, convulsive giggling.

By this time Henrik was shaken up a bit, so he made his way to a large, sparkling pond. But just before he got there, he saw a tiny sparrow lying on the ground, crying pitifully. Hovering round it was its mother.

"What is the matter?" asked Henrik.

"She is going to die," said the mother, "because her wings were broken when she foolishly tried to fight with a jay."

Henrik said nothing but stared at the little bird on the ground.

"Is there nothing you can do?" he asked at length.

"Nothing," said the mother, "except sing to her the most beautiful notes I know how to sing. The cardinal or the oriole could do it better, but she is my child, and because I love her I must sing."

"Do you know the meaning of life?" Henrik asked, not willing to waste any more time.

"Alas, no," said the sparrow, "I don't know the meaning of death either. I only know how to sing."

"Very well," said Henrik and went to squat on the edge of the pond in deep perplexity. Never in all his life had he been so confused.

"What is the matter," boomed a frog, "and how can you have the



audacity to sit on the bank of *my* pond without asking?"

"I'm looking for the meaning of life," Henrik said, "Can you help me?"

"Of course I can't." The frog rolled his eyes in indignation. "That's up to you, you silly duck."

"But I've searched and searched." Henrik was feeling rather sad. He soon found he was telling the story of his journey to the frog.

"Humph," commented the frog. "You've seen the answer to your questions."

"But I don't understand," wailed Henrik.

"Exactly. You lack one very important thing. Few ducks ever find it," the frog grumbled and disappeared beneath a lily pad.

Henrik sat on the edge of the pond and thought. A gold butterfly skimmed over his head and landed on a tall cattail.

"Do you . . .?" began Henrik and then stopped.

She was being pursued by a large blackbird who swooped and dived.

"Stop!" shouted Henrik to the bird. "Let her fly."

But the bird swallowed the gold butterfly and flew off, and only the slender cattail and Henrik knew what had happened.

Two large tears formed in Henrik's eyes, but he brushed them away with a wing—a grey, bedraggled wing by this time.

"It must be so. The frog was right." He started back down the path, a little slower this time, for he had found what he was looking for.

## The Brass Key

Ron Schaffner

MILDRED WINSLOW slowly and with great effort trudged up the creaking stairway toward her third floor flat. The staircase was dimly lit, but the poor light did not hide the exposed lathe and bits of plaster that lay scattered about. The maroon stair carpet was frayed and showed worn threads over its entire length.

She reached her floor and paused to catch her breath. A few more steps, and she slipped the little brass key into the lock and entered. A flood of light from the bare windows seared her eyes, and she turned away quickly. Slipping out of a well-worn mink, she dropped into an old over-stuffed chair that freely displayed its insides.

"Is this me?" she thought. "I detested giving up the place on Sheridan Road . . . nothing else I could do." She closed her eyes to her, now, immodest surroundings and let her mind trickle back to that beautiful, lavishly furnished lake-front apartment. A life of wealth and luxury had slipped away and been replaced in its closing hours by one of strife and financial hardship. Bitterly, she remembered her husband's suicide and then the creditors and court