

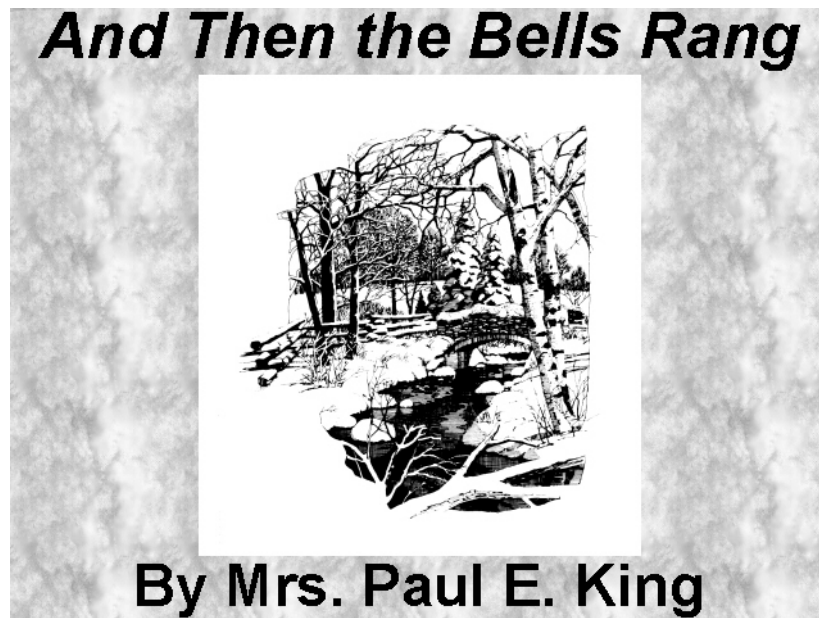
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**AND THEN THE BELLS RANG**  
**By Mrs. Paul E. King**

Jantzen Schwartzenmuller was tired; bone tired. Not, perhaps, so much physically tired as in-heart bone tired. All his life (or so it seemed to him) he had made others laugh by his dry humor and wit. It was a natural thing for him. He had never meant to do it but practically everything he said -- or commented on -- came out as dry humor and clever wit.

To say that he had friends by the score was an understatement: people sought him out like bees in search of honey producing blossoms. People wanted humor. They wanted to laugh. They were full-up of pressures and problems and perplexities and purposeless living. They wanted laughter, much laughter. Something to drown their sorrows and make them forget about their cares and burdens and heartaches, if only for a little while. And in his natural, easy way, he had given them what they wanted and, in many cases, even, what they had paid for: he became a paid humorist.

Jantzen heaved a heavy sigh as he sloshed through the slushy, sloppy, partially melted snow which, a fortnight ago had covered the earth with a deep, almost twelve-inch, blanket of glistening white. At nineteen, he was quite a celebrity: a star, in his own right.

He had not planned it thus. Not at all: it had just . . . well . . . it had just happened. He found himself in demand for banquets, parties, shows -- and he was the show. But he wasn't happy. Not at all. It was as if something was in reverse -- he was entertaining others and making them laugh but he . . . well . . . he was still in youth's prime and he, it was, who should have been enjoying life and laughing with life and at life. Instead, he felt old. And weary. And tired. So very tired.

Surely, he declared silently to his heart -- and to himself -- there must be more to life than this . . . this ceaseless round of laughter and lightness and frivolity. Surely! Surely, there must be. It was hollow. It was like a sieve -- nothing left after it was run through -- empty.

Jantzen realized that his name alone was an "eye-stopper." No common, easy, Brown or Smith or Miller or Jones, his name. It took a bit more time to roll the Schwartzen part on one's tongue than to address a Brown or a Miller. Yet, strange as it all seemed, his name had helped to make him popular and famous. Where did one hear the name Jantzen, frequently, and how many parents would think of naming a son thusly? And the Schwartzenmuller? Well, that smacked heavily of the old world. It had an air of antiquity and a breath of a gentler era about it. It represented different things to different people, all of which seemed only to enhance his popularity and make him a bit more of an enigma than he actually was. Or cared to be.

He walked on, not thinking -- or caring -- where he was going. He was thankful to be done with his part of the entertainment for the night and, being

of a morally good nature, he had no desire to remain for the other shows. He knew only that what followed his part was not innocent humor nor morally clean entertainment.

What was he doing in places such as he had just left? he wondered with hammering heart. If they were not decent enough for him to remain in why was he there at all? He didn't drink and neither did he smoke

He guessed his grandparents' prayers could be credited for that. Not that he was religious himself. But, then, why should he be? His father certainly was not religious. He was anything but religious. And as for his mother, he was too little to remember anything much about her. He did have a very real remembrance and recollection of thinking she looked like a shining angel, lying on the shiny satin pillow inside her casket bed.

Sometimes her face came back to him even yet in a way that he couldn't explain. He supposed, had he been asked for a reason -- or reasons -- why he didn't drink or smoke or carouse -- he'd have to say it was because of his mother's shining angel face and of her parents' fervent prayers for him. His mother was a saintly woman, so he had heard by many different people.

Jantzen seemed unusually restless tonight. He wished he could feel and experience what others were feeling. They called it the "spirit of Christmas," or "that Christmas feeling." But he had no different than ever feeling. And the thoughts of going home to the posh apartment he shared with his affluent father was almost unbearable this night -- he would be there alone. Alone, on Christmas eve! No, he couldn't do it. The loneliness would close in upon him and make him feel like he was suffocating. Better by far to walk than to sit alone on this night.

He thrust his hands deeply into the pockets of his expensive knee-length, supple leather coat, wondering why he hadn't asked Janette Wireman for a date. Of all the girls he knew, he guessed Janette was his favorite. She knew how to conduct herself like a real lady and she was of a gentler, sweeter nature than the others. The girls who squealed and screamed over him did nothing more than make him want to run from them. He had nothing within him that made him desirous of becoming anyone's idol. And those squealing, screaming, swooning girls who tried to paw all over him, after -- and during -- a performance made his stomach feel sick.

He walked on, unmindful of the softly-falling snowflakes that were now falling and of the air which had become decidedly colder, freezing the sloppy slush beneath his feet. He needed to analyze his feelings and discern why he was entertaining people in places which were less than desirable for taking wives and children.

He loathed what he was doing. He knew this. He knew it -- as surely and truly as he knew his name. Then why, he asked himself, was he doing it? Money?. He knew his father would supply all his needs. No question in his mind about this. None at all. Still, it was nice to be supporting one's self, he had to admit. But there were other ways of earning one's money and of making an honest living, he knew, feeling again the urge to pursue something worthwhile. Something rewarding. If only he had not gotten started in this, he thought.

Lights twinkled and blinked and winked from windows and doorways and carollers sang the sweetly familiar Christmas carols from door to door as Jantzen walked on, deep in thought, groping for an answer. His father had said he was foolish for not making some special plans for this night -- a date; an out of town trip; a concert at the music hall. Anything. But he couldn't. Nothing appealed to him. Maybe it was because he was tired. In his heart, tired -- of his dull, empty, unsatisfying life and living. He made the multitudes laugh but he was mirthless. Unhappy. His heart seldom laughed; it felt too empty and lonely and dissatisfied to laugh. There had to be something more. There just had to be!

As if in answer to his deepest longing, his grandparents' praying postures and their tear, streaked faces came before him in bold remembrance and painful recollection. He was only twelve when his father broke the news to him that they were killed by some drunken driver on their way home from a church service in their little town. But so long as he lived and his memory served him well, he would remember hearing them pray for him. They loved him. How they loved him! And he loved them as well.

He felt a tear slide from his eye. It ran down his cheek, coldly. He brushed it away. But another fell to take its place. It came as a shock and a surprise to him.

He turned down a street and came face to face with a joyful group of happy young people. They were his age, most of them, he was sure. In a burst

of jubilant song, they sang, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King.

"Let every heart prepare Him room, And Heav'n and nature sing, and Heav'n and nature sing, and Heav'n and nature sing."

Jantzen paused for a moment. Then, as though he was hypnotized, he stood rigidly still, watching. Listening. Wondering. Marveling. These young people were joyously happy. Their voices rang with what they were experiencing and feeling inside, in their souls. These were not mere words they were singing; they were real. In their hearts, real. Something from within radiated out in their countenances.

And then the bells rang. On every corner, it seemed, Jantzen heard church bells ringing, ringing, ringing.

He turned, and just as he did so, the young people shouted, "A blessed Christmas to you, everyone. Jesus Christ is real. He lives within our hearts. Do you know Him? You don't! Ask Him to come into your heart then. He'll save you and He'll forgive you of all your sins. You will then know the real meaning of Christmas. Again, a blessed Christmas to you, everyone."

With a genuine and joyous, "God bless you," they hurried away.

Jantzen stood like one rooted to the snow-covered sidewalk. Never had he heard anything more beautiful or inspiring coming from a group of young people. Their final, in-unison spoken words were the most beautiful of all, he felt. The pure diction and the inflection of their voices at the right time was awe-inspiring. Heavenly. It gripped his heart. What they were singing and saying was genuine and real to each of them. No put-on; none at all. They were speaking to him. Oh, they didn't say so and they didn't know it, but they were. It was almost as if they were God's voice to him. No, he admitted silently, there was no almost about it; they were God's voice to him. Without a doubt, they were.

He bowed his head. As best as he knew how, he prayed. It came straight from the depth of his soul -- a prayer for mercy. For pardon. Forgiveness.

The bells continued to ring. More loudly and wildly now. It was like Heaven had come down to earth. And suddenly, the bells were ringing in his soul. They were heavenly bells. And birds were singing and he, like an imprisoned, caged being, was set free. Instantly, free! Never in his life had he felt like this. He wanted to sing and shout, to tell it from the housetops that Jesus Christ could set man free. Free from sin, from bondage, from fear and from emptiness.

Jantzen looked around him. Everything looked new. Different. Beautiful.

He lifted his hands upward and wept for joy. His heart was satisfied; like a bird that had found its nest, so his soul had found its rest. Oh, it was wonderful! Gloriously wonderful! Now he knew why those young people sang as they had.

A hand came down gently upon his shoulder and a soft voice said, "There's a service going on inside the church on the corner; care to join us? You look like you're bursting with joy."

"Oh, I am! I am! Thank you. Yes, I'll come. I want to come Tonight marks a new beginning for me: I found the Lord Jesus Christ. He has come into my heart."

"Then come with me, Jantzen."

"You . . . you know who I am?"

"I suppose everyone knows you around here -- your picture is much in the newspaper. And by the way, I'm Kirk Mendall, one of the carollers you heard a short while ago. We'll be delighted to have you in our youth group."

Jantzen's eyes brightened. Gripping Kirk's hand in a tight handshake, he said, "I'm pleased to meet you, Kirk. And now, if you will, I want you to forget about the old Jantzen; he's dead: the new Jantzen is alive in Christ. Look on me as another sojourner in this life who is on his way to Heaven. Tonight, God changed me. That means that what I have been doing via entertaining, stops, as of this night. The path ahead is shining brightly and, Kirk, I'm not lonely nor empty feeling anymore. My heart is satisfied. Now I must tell others about Him."

"Let's go inside," Kirk said. "Tonight you'll have time to tell the church people what Christ did for you a few minutes ago. We call it testifying, Jantzen. And I know for sure that while the people are rejoicing with you down here, there's rejoicing in Heaven too."

"But no one can be happier than I am," Jantzen remarked, as he entered the church with Kirk.