













ROSA MUNDI

*and Other Stories*

BY ETHEL M. DELL

AUTHOR OF

*The Bars of Iron, The Keeper of the Door,  
The Knave of Diamonds, The Obstacle Race,  
The Rocks of Valpré, The Way of an Eagle, etc.*





## CONTENTS

### ROSA MUNDI

#### A DEBT OF HONOR

- I. – HOPE AND THE MAGICIAN
- II. – THE VISITOR
- III. – THE FRIEND IN NEED
- IV. – HER NATURAL PROTECTOR
- V. – MORE THAN A FRIEND
- VI. – HER ENEMY
- VII. – THE SCRAPE
- VIII. – BEFORE THE RACE
- IX. – THE RACE
- X. – THE ENEMY'S TERMS
- XI. – WITHOUT DEFENCE
- XII. – THE PENALTY
- XIII. – THE CURSE OF THE VALLEY
- XIV. – HOW THE TALE WAS TOLD
- XV. – THE NIGHT OF DESPAIR
- XVI. – THE COMING OF HOPE

#### THE DELIVERER

- I. – A PROMISE OF MARRIAGE
- II. – A RING OF VALUE
- III. – THE HONEYMOON
- IV. – A GRIEVOUS WOUND
- V. – A STRUGGLE FOR MASTERY
- VI. – AN OFFER OF HELP
- VII. – THE DELIVERER
- VIII. – AFTER THE ACCIDENT
- IX. – THE END OF A MYSTERY
- X. – TAKEN TO TASK
- XI. – MONEY'S NOT EVERYTHING
- XII. – AFTERWARDS – LOVE



**THE PREY OF THE DRAGON**

**THE SECRET SERVICE MAN**

**I. – A TIGHT PLACE**

**II. – A BROKEN FRIENDSHIP**

**III. – DERRICK'S PARADISE**

**IV. – CARLYON DEFENDS HIMSELF**

**V. – A WOMAN'S FORGIVENESS**

**VI. – FIEND OR KING?**

**VII. – THE REAL COLONEL CARLYON**

**VIII. – THE STRANGER ON THE VERANDA**

**IX. – A FIGHT IN THE NIGHT**

**X. – SAVED A SECOND TIME**

**XI. – THE SECRET OUT**

**THE PENALTY**



## Rosa Mundi

Was the water blue, or was it purple that day? Randal Courteney stretched his lazy length on the shady side of the great natural breakwater that protected Hurley Bay from the Atlantic rollers, and wondered. It was a day in late September, but the warmth of it was as a dream of summer returned. The season was nearly over, or he had not betaken himself thither, but the spell of heat had prolonged it unduly. It had been something of a shock to him to find the place still occupied by a buzzing crowd of visitors. He never came to it till he judged the holidays to be practically over. For he loved it only when empty. His idea of rest was solitude.

He wondered how long this pearly weather would last, and scanned the sky for a cloud. In vain! There was no cloud all round that blue horizon, and behind him the cliffs stood stark against an azure sky. Summer was lingering, and even he had not the heart to wish her gone.

Something splashed noisily on the other side of the rocky breakwater. Something squeaked and gurgled. The man frowned. He had tramped a considerable distance to secure privacy. He had his new novel to think out. This invasion was intolerable. He had not even smoked the first pipe of his meditations. Impatiently he prepared to rise and depart.

But in that moment a voice accosted him, and in spite of himself he paused. "I want to get over the breakwater," said the voice. "There's such a large crab lives this side."

It was an engaging voice—a voice with soft, lilting notes in it—the voice of a child.

Courteney's face cleared a little. The grimness went out of his frown, the reluctance from his attitude. He stood up against the rocky barrier and stretched his hands over to the unseen owner of the voice.

"I'll help you," he said.

"Oh!" There was an instant's pause; then two other hands, wet, cool, slender, came up, clasping his. A little leap, a sudden strain,

and a very pink face beneath a cloud of golden hair laughed down into his. "You must pull," she said; "pull hard!"

Courteney obeyed instructions. He pulled, and a pair of slim shoulders clad in white, with a blue sailor collar, came into view. He pulled again, and a white knee appeared, just escaping a blue serge skirt. At the third pull she was over and standing, bare-footed, by his side. It had been a fairy leap. He marvelled at the lightness of her till he saw her standing so, with merry eyes upraised to his. Then he laughed, for she was laughing—the infectious laugh of the truant.

"Oh, thank you ever so much," she said. "I knew it was much nicer this side than the other. No one can see us here, either."

"Is that why you wanted to get over?" he asked.

She nodded, her pink face all mystery. "It's nice to get away from everyone sometimes, isn't it? Even Rosa Mundi thinks that. Did you know that she is here? It is being kept a dead secret."

"Rosa Mundi!" Courteney started. He looked down into the innocent face upraised to his with something that was almost horror in his own. "Do you mean that dancing woman from Australia? What can a child like you know of her?"

She smiled at him, the mystery still in her eyes. "I do know her. I belong to her. Do you know her, too?"

A sudden hot flush went up over Courteney's face. He knew the woman; yes, he knew her. Was it years ago—or was it but yesterday?—that he had yielded to the importunities of his friend, young Eric Baron, and gone to see her dance? The boy had been infatuated, wild with the lure of her. Ah well, it was over now. She had been his ruin, just as she had been the ruin of others like him. Baron was dead and free for ever from the evil spell of his enchantress. But he had not thought to hear her name in this place and on the lips of a child.

It revolted him. For she had utterly failed to attract his fancy. He was fastidious, and all he had seen in her had been the sensuous charm of a sinuous grace which, to him, was no charm at all. He had almost hated her for the abject adoration that young Eric's eyes had

held. Her art, wonderful though he admitted it to be, had wholly failed to enslave him. He had looked her once—and once only—in the eyes, judged her, and gone his way.

And now this merry-eyed, rosy-faced child came, fairy-footed, over the barrier of his reserve, and spoke with a careless familiarity of the only being in the world whom he had condemned as beyond the pale.

"I'm not supposed to tell anyone," she said, with sapphire eyes uplifted confidingly to his. "She isn't—really—here before the end of the week. You won't tell, will you? Only when I saw you plodding along out here by yourself, I just had to come and tell you, to cheer you up."

He stood and looked at her, not knowing what to say. It was as if some adverse fate were at work, driving him, impelling him.

The soft eyes sparkled into laughter. "I know who you are," chuckled the gay voice on a high note of merriment. "You are Randal Courteney, the writer. It's not a bit of good trying to hide, because everybody knows."

He attempted a frown, but failed in its achievement. "And who are you?" he said, looking straight into the daring, trusting eyes. She was, not beautiful, but her eyes were wonderful; they held a mystery that beckoned and eluded in the same subtle moment.

"I?" she said. "I am her companion, her familiar spirit. Sometimes she calls me her angel."

The man moved as if something had stung him, but he checked himself with instinctive self-control. "And your name?" he said.

She turned out her hands with a little gesture that was utterly unstudied and free from self-consciousness. "My name is Rosemary," she said. "It means—remembrance."

"You are her adopted child?" Courteney was, looking at her curiously. Out of what part of Rosa Mundi's strange, fretted existence had the desire for remembrance sprung to life? He had deemed her a woman of many episodes, each forgotten as its successor took its place. Yet it seemed this child held a corner in her memory that was to last.

She turned her face to the sun. "We have adopted each other," she said naïvely. "When Rosa Mundi is old, I shall take her place, so that she may still be remembered."

The words, "Heaven forbid!" were on Courteney's lips. He checked them sharply, but something of his original grimness returned as he said, "And now that you are on the other side of the breakwater, what are you going to do?"

She looked up at him speculatively, and in a moment tossed back the short golden curls that clustered at her neck. She was sublimely young. In the eyes of the man, newly awakened, she had the look of one who has seen life without comprehending it. "I always like to get the other side of things, don't you?" she said. "But I won't stay with you if you are bored. I am going right to the end of the rocks to see the tide come in."

"And be washed away?" suggested Courteney.

"Oh no," she assured him confidently. "That won't happen. I'm not nearly so young as I look. I only dress like this when I want to enjoy myself. Rosa Mundi says" – her eyes were suddenly merry – "that I'm not respectable. Now, don't you think that sounds rather funny?"

"From her – yes," said Courteney.

"You don't like her?" The shrewd curiosity of a child who desires understanding upon a forbidden subject was in the question.

The man evaded it. "I have never seen her except in the limelight."

"And you didn't like her – then?" Keen disappointment sounded in her voice.

His heart smote him. The child was young, though possibly not so young as she looked. She had her ideals, and they would be shattered soon enough without any help from him.

With a brief laugh he turned aside, dismissing the subject. "That form of entertainment doesn't appeal to me much," he said. "Now it's your turn to tell me something. I have been wondering about the colour of that sea. Would you call it blue – or purple?"

She looked, and again the mystery was in her face. For a moment she did not speak. Then, "It is violet," she said — "the colour of Rosa Mundi's eyes."

Ere the frown had died from his face she was gone, pattering lightly over the sand, flitting like a day-dream into the blinding sunshine that seemed to drop a veil behind her, leaving him to his thoughts.

Randal Courteney was an old and favoured guest at the Hurley Bay Hotel. From his own particular corner of the great dining-room he was accustomed to look out upon the world that came and went. Frequently when he was there the place was almost deserted, and always he had been treated as the visitor of most importance. But to-night, for the first time, he found himself supplanted. Someone of more importance was staying in the hotel, someone who had attracted crowds, whose popularity amounted almost to idolatry.

The hotel was full, but Courteney, despite his far-reaching fame, was almost entirely overlooked. News had spread that the wonderful Australian dancer was to perform at the Pier Pavilion at the end of the week, and the crowds had gathered to do her honour. They were going to strew the Pier with roses on the night of her appearance, and they were watching even now for the first sign of her with all the eager curiosity that marks down any celebrity as fair prey. Courteney smiled grimly to himself. How often it had been his lot to evade the lion-hunters! It was an unspeakable relief to have the general attention thus diverted from himself. Doubtless Rosa Mundi would revel in it. It was her *rôle* in life, the touchstone of her profession. Adulation was the very air she breathed.

He wondered a little to find her seeking privacy, even for a few days. Just a whim of hers, no doubt! Was she not ever a creature of whims? And it would not last. He remembered how once young Eric Baron had told him that she needed popularity as a flower needs the sun. His rose of the world had not been created to bloom unseen. The boy had been absurdly long-suffering, unbelievably blind. How bitter, how cruel, had been his disillusion, Courteney could only guess. Had she ever cared, ever regretted, he wondered? But no, he was sure she had not. She would care for nothing until the bloom faded. Then, indeed, possibly, remorse might come.

Someone passing his table paused and spoke—the managing director of the Hurley Bay Theatre and of a score of others, a man he knew slightly, older than himself. "The hive swarms in vain," he said. "The queen refuses to emerge."

Courteney's expression was supremely cynical. "I was not aware that she was of such a retiring disposition," he said.

The other man laughed. He was an American, Ellis Grant by name, a man of gross proportions, but keen-eyed, iron-jawed, and successful. "There is a rumour," he said, "that she is about to be married. Possibly that might account for her shyness."

His look was critical. Courteney threw back his head almost with defiance. "It doesn't interest me," he said curtly.

Ellis Grant laughed again and passed on. He valued his acquaintanceship with the writer. He would not jeopardize it with overmuch familiarity. But he did not believe in the utter lack of interest that he professed. No living man who knew her could be wholly indifferent to the doings of Rosa Mundi. The fiery charm of her, her passionate vitality, made that impossible.

Courteney finished his dinner and went out. The night was almost as hot as the day had been. He turned his back on the Pier, that was lighted from end to end, and walked away down the long parade.

He was beginning to wish himself out of the place. He had an absurd feeling of being caught in some web of Fate that clung to him tenaciously, strive as he would. Grant's laugh of careless incredulity pursued him. There had been triumph also in that laugh. No doubt the fellow anticipated a big haul on Rosa Mundi's night.

And again there rose before him the memory of young Eric Baron's ardent face. "I'd marry her to-morrow if she'd have me," the boy had said to him once.

The boy had been a fool, but straight. The woman—well, the woman was not the marrying sort. He was certain of that. She was elusive as a flame. Impatiently yet again he flung the thought of her from him. What did it matter to him? Why should he be haunted by her thus? He would not suffer it.

He tramped to the end of the parade and stood looking out over the dark sea. He was sorry for that adopted child of hers. That face of innocence rose before him clear against the gathering dark. Not much chance for the child, it seemed! Utterly unspoilt and unsophisticated at present, and the property of that *demi-mondaine*! He wondered if there could be any relationship between them. There was something in the child's eyes that in some strange fashion recalled the eyes of Rosa Mundi. So might she once have gazed in innocence upon a world unknown.

Again, almost savagely, he strove to thrust away the thoughts that troubled him. The child was bound to be contaminated sooner or later; but what was that to him? It was out of his power to deliver her. He was no rescuer of damsels in distress.

So he put away from him the thought of Rosa Mundi and the thought of the child called Rosemary who had come to him out of the morning sunlight, and went back to his hotel doggedly determined that neither the one nor the other should disturb his peace of mind. He would take refuge in his work, and forget them.

But late that night he awoke from troubled sleep to hear Ellis Grant laugh again in careless triumph—the laugh of the man who knows that he has drawn a prize.

It was not a restful night for Randal Courteney, and in the early morning he was out again, striding over the sunlit sands towards his own particular bathing-cove beyond the breakwater.

The tide was coming in, and the dashing water filled all the world with its music. A brisk wind was blowing, and the waves were high.

It was the sort of sea that Courteney revelled in, and he trusted that, at that early hour, he would be free from all intrusion. So accustomed to privacy was he that he had come to regard the place almost as his own.

But as he topped the breakwater he came upon a sight that made him draw back in disgust. A white mackintosh lay under a handful of stones upon the shingly beach. He surveyed it suspiciously, with the air of a man who fears that he is about to walk into a trap.

Then, his eyes travelling seaward, he spied a red cap bobbing up and down in the spray of the dancing waves.

The impulse to turn and retrace his steps came to him, but some unknown force restrained him. He remembered suddenly the current that had more than once drawn him out of his course when bathing in those waters, and the owner of the red cap was alone. He stood, uncertain, on the top of the breakwater, and watched.

Two minutes later the very event he had pictured was taking place under his eyes, and he was racing over the soft sand below the shingle at the top of his speed. Two arms were beating wildly out in the shining sparkle of water, as though they strove against the invisible bars of a cage, and a voice—the high, frightened voice of a child—was calling for help.

He flung off his coat as he ran, and dashed without an instant's pause straight into the green foaming waves. The water swirled around him as he struck out; he clove his way through it, all his energies concentrated upon the bobbing red cap and struggling arms ahead of him. Lifted on the crest of a rushing wave, he saw her, helpless as an infant in the turmoil. Her terrified eyes were turned his way, wildly beseeching him. He fought with the water to reach her.

He realized as he drew nearer that she was not wholly inexperienced. She was working against the current to keep herself up, but no longer striving to escape it. He saw with relief that she had not lost her head.

He had been prepared to approach her with caution, but she sent him a sudden, brave smile that reassured him.

"Be quick!" she gasped. "I'm nearly done."

The current caught him, but with a powerful stroke or two he righted his course and reached her. Her hand closed upon his shoulder.

"I'm all right now," she panted, and despite the distress of her breathing, he caught the note of confidence in her voice.

"We've got to get out of it," he made grim answer. "Get your hand in my belt; that'll help you best. Then, when you're ready, strike out