



## "Spring Street Peppermint"

— Jeri Jennings

A narrow street in a Sierra Foothills Gold-Rush-Era town turns a corner and narrows further. The curve skirts an old concrete retaining wall, which rises some ten feet. An ancient picket fence, meticulously-detailed, long-ago painted white, tops the wall. Green leaves and pink roses push through the fence, to splash color down the gray wall. The scene calls the Rose Adventurer.

Standing IN the street, *OH* — it *IS* narrow! — body hugging the concrete for an illusion of safety, the Adventurer begins an intimate acquaintance with the rose.

Long arching canes bear small, deeply ruffled blooms on short laterals. Smaller than a quarter, the blooms are flat, — as ruffled as a ballerina's tutu, and set off by elaborately-ruffled sepals, as elegant as miniature sculptures. The plant appears to be Polyantha in character.

One half of each ruffled bloom is a pretty pink — a color slightly softer than that of amusement-park cotton candy — the other half is warm blush. Some Gallicas do this, (along with other stripy, splashy color changes). *'Mme. Ernst Calvat,'* does it, sometimes, sporting partially back to *'Mme. Isaac Pereire.'* "Smiths' Parish" does it. On these small blooms, the color shift creates an irresistible resemblance to old-fashioned, home-made peppermint drops.

Rank growth cascades down the wall: The rose blends with Tree Of Heaven, and an assortment of vigorous weeds. Behind the branches, the adventurer discovers a set of stairs, edges softened by age, molded deep into the wall. They're long-unused, and dark with lichens, but sturdy. Old stairs invite climbing. And who WOULDN'T

want to know what lies at the top of the wall, behind that fragile fence?

Come up the stairs. There's a gate here! Once, it opened into a little "dooryard" garden, but it's shut fast now — nailed, maybe, a long time ago. The gate's no barrier; the old fence is beyond rotted. Pickets crumble at a touch. The Adventurer, hesitates, however. She draws the line at breaking and entering .

The "Peppermint" rose springs from a spot to the left of the gate. From up here, the plant is seen to be arching, with wiry canes of moderate size.

At the back of this lost garden, a small clapboard cottage, teeters on the verge of a final collapse. In front of the cottage door, an old lilac grows vigorously, past its spring bloom, covered with lovely, green, heart-shaped leaves. It looks like someone, long ago, closed the door and left forever.

**"When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd . . . "** springs irresistibly to mind.

Poetry comes naturally in this strange pocket garden, where traffic sounds are strangely muffled, and even the breeze seems stilled. If there are places where past and present brush against one another, and the barriers between times thin, this would be such a place.

The Adventurer steps silently down the old staircase. She turns to look back. From the street, the lost garden is hidden. Only the "Peppermint" rose hints at the tiny world hidden at the top of the wall, behind the old picket fence. She will keep its secret.

*(Jennings, 2006 — Please do not reprint without express written permission)*

### ***When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd***

from "Memories of President Lincoln"

*When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,  
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,  
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.  
Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,  
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,  
And thought of him I love.*

*In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings,  
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,  
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,  
With every leaf a miracle -- and from this bush in the dooryard,  
With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,  
A sprig with its flower I break.*

*Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,  
I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring.*

(Walt Whitman, 1865)