

**WRITERS OF TODAY**  
**IN SOUTH CAROLINA**  
 State - April 8, 1934  
 By E. A. M.

**Julia Peterkin, 1880.**  
 Julia Peterkin's books have won international fame and have been reviewed by the able pens of the keenest judges of literature, thus it is not my desire nor intention to present her as much from the literary point of view as from the personal aspect. She is the daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Julius Mood and was born in Laurens county, South Carolina, All Halloween night. Yearly, not only goblins and ghosts are walking abroad on this night, but spirits are flying through the air, and it is easy to believe that one of these sprites attended the birth of the little Julia and endowed her with the agile brain and the will to use it, which has given her such a complete and satisfying life.

I would like to have seen her as a red-haired, long-legged child absorbed in everything about her. Her mother died when she was two years old and she was brought up by her father, her grandmother and her Negro "mauma." For the latter she had that reverent devotion which the little white children of the South so often have for their nurses, and which is so touchingly and profoundly returned. Mrs. Peterkin says that she was not sufficiently interested in books to be naturally studious, but, adoring an elder sister and wishing to emulate her, she applied herself diligently to her lessons and was graduated from Converse college at the precocious age of 16. The following year she received her M. A. from Converse and, much against the wishes of her family, resolved to become a teacher. She secured a position at Fort Motte, S. C., and although her class was small it is tedious work for a girl 17 years old to be shut up in a schoolroom all day. To abandon a chosen project, however, has never been one of Mrs. Peterkin's characteristics and she persisted in her teaching for two years, when she married William Peterkin, a cotton planter of the neighborhood.

Since 1903 she has lived at Lang Syne plantation near Fort Motte. To an unusual extent the old feudal system still prevails on this plantation, and Mrs. Peterkin's familiarity with every intricacy of her Negro people's lives, her intimate appreciation of their virtues and her understanding of their frailties and foibles renders her peculiarly fitted to deal with them as their mistress and interpreter. She was constantly observing the flow and surge of Negro life, and without the remotest idea of using them for copy, she was visiting them in their cabins, talking and listening to them sympathetically, caring for the sick, attending their weddings and funerals, and their "watch" night services of prayer and song. She and her husband were lawyer, doctor, counselor and friend to their Negro people.

The routine of helping to manage a plantation did not offer enough scope for one of Mrs. Peterkin's active disposition. Isolation may either blunt the faculties or it may develop and quicken independence and initiative, as it has done with her. She has always sought an outlet in hobbies, and she says it has been great fun to grow roses, to raise Llewellyn settlers, fancy pigeons and White Holland turkeys. She does beautiful embroidery and she has planted rare

fruits and vegetables simply to see how many of them would mature in this climate. She made quite a name for herself locally when she played the leading role in "Enter Madame" and again in "Hedda Gabler" in the little Town theater in Columbia. She loves to ride, to dance and to swim. She never usurps the first place as a conversationalist, but she loves to entertain her friends and she talks pungently and well.

Something more than the taking up of a hobby was her decision to study music. She set herself the task of learning as many of Beethoven's sonatas as she possibly could, and to have a good teacher she drove 40 miles to Columbia twice a week for her lessons. She joined a music club and worked hard to hold her own amongst the other musicians.

Music was not really her metier, and her teacher, who was also a literary critic, was so impressed by the graphic way in which she related to him anecdotes of her plantation Negroes that he suggested that she write them down. Until now she had not even believed that she could write a good letter and she says that she never wrote a decent paper at college because she could not become enthusiastic over the topics assigned to her. Now she began to record a variety of incidents that had been happening around her for years, about the people in whom she was profoundly interested and of whom she had a great deal to say. She soon found that writing was not merely a pastime but a release from the inhibitions that she had long had. She had seen so much of grief and horror and the elemental passions, birth and death and love and jealousy, that it was like the unloosing of a torrent when her words began to flow. She sent some of her sketches to The Reviewer in Richmond and they attracted the attention of H. L. Mencken and other critics, and a collection of them was published in 1924 in book form, bearing the name, "Green Thursday."

At home and abroad the volume came in for its full share of praise and censure. There were many who thought they too knew the Negro, and who could not agree with Mrs. Peterkin in her belief in their ideals. There is a brutality in her delineation of episodes which accentuates and brings out the actuality of her characters, and this offends the more delicately minded of her readers. With stark realism she shows up a people whose veneer of civilization is very thin. The frenzy of lamentation at a funeral, the agony of death-bed repentance, the reliance on the efficacy of charms and "conjures" are barbaric in their intensity. When asked how many of the incidents in "Green Thursday" were fiction, she answered that a large part of it is fact, that she had formed the habit of utilizing the real happenings on the plantation and when you are writing out of your own experience you don't have to rely upon your imagination. Carl Sandburg once told Mrs. Peterkin that she was the only writer he knew who was not a literary person. It is hard to improve on the truth, and she writes of what she knows and has seen and heard, thus the vividness of portrayal which causes her readers who, too, have lived on plantation, to feel a deep

nostalgia and to involuntarily exclaim, "Why, I might have written that myself, I have known all of these things always."

"Black April" followed "Green Thursday" in 1927. April is a Negro around whom cluster myriads of events in the lives of the Brook Green plantation Negroes. Welded together they make a novel of power and personality. In 1928, "Scarlet Sister Mary" was published and it won the Pulitzer prize for the year.

Si May-e is one of the great heroines of Negro literature. She is introduced to us on her wedding day, "a slender, darting, high-spirited girl, a leader of the young set and afire to be married to July," who was, perhaps, the wildest young buck in the quarters. A profound change comes over Si May-e when July abandons her shortly after the birth of little Unex. She droops and pines away until Maum Hannah finally convinces her that "no man livin' is worth one drop o' water that dreams out a 'oman's eye." She tells her that there are two kinds of love, eye-love and heart-love. "Heart love and sorrow is one mudder's chillen, when you meets wid heart love, peace 'll leave you, but he kin pure smile in de face of death, honey." Si May-e believes that if she had worn a "conjure," she could have bound July to her, so she procures one and instantly no man can resist her. She thinks that the "conjure" makes her irresistible, but she was as surely born with charm as were any of the great sorceresses from the beginning of time. She takes a new man every year and her cabin overflows with the gay laughter of children and her own happiness. Twenty years after his desertion of her, July returns to Si May-e, but she exultantly rejects him. After the tragic death of Unex, she has a vision of her sins and repents and confesses before the entire congregation. How human it is for her to put on her big gold earrings and her "conjure" rag when she prepares to go before her judges! "I couldn' gi' way my love charm," she says, "'e's all I got now to keep me young." Through the pages there drifts the fragrance of plum blossoms as the soft blooms whiten the black twigs, and always you feel very close to the earth, the good fructifying earth that yields so much of life and beauty. In "Scarlet Sister Mary" there is no mention of a white person. "I will never write of them," Mrs. Peterkin says, "their lives are not so colorful."

The book was dramatized and produced on Broadway in 1930. Ethel Barrymore took the part of Sister Mary but it did not make an interesting play. One of the criticisms was that Negro plays should be acted by Negroes. "Bright Skin" came out in 1932. It has the episodic pattern of "Black April" and is woven around a "no nation" or mulatto girl named Cricket. Cricket is a glowing personality and she sparkles against the background of the Sea Island country of South Carolina.

"Roll, Jordan, Roll" appeared in 1933 and is an enlightening picturization in two mediums of the Gullah Negro. There are 70 full page photographs by the gifted Doris Ulman, and they show us something that even the talented pen of Mrs. Peterkin cannot portray. There is a long chapter explaining many of the Negro superstitions and signs, and Mrs. Peterkin says that in this book she has particularly wanted to tell things and see them in print before they are forgotten.

Tad said of Doctor Adams: "The doctor can't write any more 'cause I done tell him all I know." With Mrs. Peterkin, you feel that she is compelled to write, that she has had boundless experiences and loves to tell of them. She finds it exciting

to manage words, and with them to express shades of meaning. To all who know nothing about writing she suggests it as the most fascinating of all the avocations in reach of mankind.

I cannot resist telling of my first sight of Mrs. Peterkin. It was a breathlessly hot July afternoon. There was a funeral in the churchyard on the edge of the Congaree swamp and as we trooped out to the grave, there in the midst of the somberly clad mourners was an arresting splash of color—an apple green taffeta dress, the voluminous skirt touching the ground, a tall flexible figure, a sweep of red hair, a white face with an enigmatic expression touched with sadness. It was Mrs. Peterkin, the lady of perfect poise and calm aloofness, and yet so vividly alive, she who has made live for us and is perpetuating the life of a people whose picturesque speech and ways are rapidly vanishing.

*October 14, 1928*  
**STATE**  
 Julia Peterkin's New Story.

"Scarlet Sister Mary," cutting a wide swath of suggestions and memories athwart that cross section of mental and physical causation that we call our mind, is what we might say is an arresting and an arousing title to flame across a crimson book-cover. But the story, as scarlet as Sister Mary's sins or the Magdalen's scarf, is well worth the arousing.

One balks a little when confronted with another blaze from Mrs. Peterkin's exhaustless spectrum, but if she prefers mixing her shades in any particular manner in engaging titles, one can enter the game as frolicsomeness as she evidently does. "Green Thursday," the fine though faint beginning of a splendid series, has, fittingly, the least alluring of the hues, but suggests the ancient reflection and surmise—if certain fine things may be done in the green tree "Black April" is almost as perfect a title as that stirring story could strike from any mind. While there may be some that will protest against the inescapable suggestion of the third nuance—"Scarlet" (Woman) and "Sister"—a Negro way of expressing the equivalent of Saint—"Mary" (Magdalene), why let them protest. They will not be permitted to spoil so effective, so fitting, so comprehensive and...and shocking...a title. The shock can but prove salutary and exhilarating. It will shake down certain walls of certain old Jerichos, and shock many of us into a freer, finer, and humaner understanding of the Negro.

Mrs. Peterkin has advanced swiftly and far, and she has all the time been widening and deepening her view of life, and tightening her grip upon some of its most elusive and subtle mysteries. "Scarlet Sister Mary" is a better piece of work than is "Black April"; the story is told with greater art and with a subtler

yet robuster tone. The author has gained power in all the crafts that constitute her art, and tells in this book a story that is more interesting than anything she had done before—chiefly, perhaps, solely—because of this finer skill.

And yet the story as a yarn is not so strong as "Black April." It lacks much of the raw stuff and the naive power of the tale of the stricken black giant. There is no character in "Scarlet Sister Mary" that will at all compare with the hero of "Black April"; nor are the minor characters quite equal to those of the former story. Yet one criticism of "Black April" was that it was a little too barbaric, too close to the jungle, too unrestrained. We shuddered as we read.

One will not shudder so profoundly nor be shocked by such savageries in "Scarlet Sister Mary." The jungle has been thrust back somewhere; we are farther removed from Africa, farther even from the devouring swamps and moral fevers of Blue Brook and the isolated and sodden Negro settlement or "Street." The name, "Street," so familiar in an earlier day, suggests all of the festered horrors of some of those cluttered and huddled rotting kennels of the slaves.

In "Scarlet Sister Mary" it is not the hovels and kennels only that rot. The contagion has struck deeper, and the little clutch of black folk seems to have become a moral lazaretto. There was, to be sure, little enough conventional morality in "Black April"; but there remained a certain conscious shame of it. In "Scarlet Sister Mary," however, Mrs. Peterkin has really "corrupted" the blacks by infecting them with the morals and manners we have been finding in sophisticated stories of white society in the east and in Europe. They no longer may taunt us with a higher moral standard in their society and homes. Mrs. Peterkin reveals them to be as enmeshed in such matters, as any group in any "white" novel of the period.

The development of Mary shows remarkably fine craftsmanship. We see a girl that seems, at first mortified and tormented in morality, even in religion, disintegrating slowly, then with greater momentum, and finally crumbling into ruin. The girl Mary is so unspotted at first that she is baptized and made a saint by being called "Sister Mary." Yet she soon falls to the wiles of a young buck, July, brother of June—both monthly boys in love with her—and commits her first great sin by having an illegitimate child, beautifully named "Unexpected" and simplified to "Unex." After Mary "hab sin" the first time, the primrose path seems too alluring and too tribal to resist. Every other year, after July, who marries her, runs away with the trollop Cinder, "Sister Mary" adds another sin-child to the fast-growing nursery. One of the little sinners is

the fruit of a meeting of Mary with a Lothario from Poughkeepsie, New York, and the boy is named Keepsie.

The freedom of this life is handed on to Mary's daughter, Seraphine, who merely and slyly mixes her sin-child with her mother's, as it chanced, to be born at the time Mary has given birth to twins. This is one of the most amusing incidents of the story—the mother, hearing a strange baby's voice in the medley of her twins, finds that a third baby has been hidden in the room. Good old Maum Hannah—one of the best characters in the story-group—is shocked by this mass production of babies: She holds her shaking hands to the pitiless skies, and moans:

"Three? Si May-e had three? Great Gawd! Dat's a litter, enty?"

But a little later, Mary's boy, Unex, returns with a fourth, from his own adventure afield in the North. Even Scarlet Sister Mary sees this going too perilously near the pig-stye litter.

But Mrs. Peterkin has precisely the exact and accurate view of such dark moralities among these blacks. The race is closer to the soil, and still lies in the hot fecund lap of Nature. They take life and its natural impulses and passions as simply as these were accepted in the mother-jungle. For these Negroes have hardly been touched by what we dare to call the morals of the superior race. Perhaps the moral distinctions are merely less subtle and involve less entanglements and divorce courts and the publicity demanded by a prurient society.

Sister Mary's wild capture of men is the result of a cunjuh. Mrs. Peterkin prefers in this, as in very many true dialect words, the regular form, and always uses "conjure," which, we believe, no Negro, and few white in the South ever say. The cunjuh was prepared by the master conjurer, Daddy Cudjoe—again in the Gullah and any niggah dialect this is Cudjo—and it is strong medicine. We quote the inimitable tale of how the cunjuh was concocted and to be used on unfaithful July, but sure-fire with all men:

If July sin't conjured too bad already e won't never get shet o' de spell we'll work on em. I ain't never seen no man get loose from a 'oman what wears dis mixtry. It's de powerfullest one I knows."

Daddy took a needle and stuck the little finger of her right hand and took a drop of her blood on a wisp of cotton. "You right hand is de strong hand, honey," he said. "It's de hand what catches and holds."

Then he took a bit of skin from her left heel. "Dis is de foot what walks fastest, honey."

A bit of toe-nail from a toe on her left foot was added to one hair plucked from her left armpit as near to her heart as she could get it. These were all mixed with some sort of conjure root and tied into a tiny scrap of white cloth with a string long enough to go round her neck. Daddy Cudjoe was excited. His eyes shone and sweat ran down his forehead as he handed the bag to her with a high crackling laugh.

"Put em on, gal. Wear em day and night. If e don't work, den I'll quit makin' love-charms for de rest o' my life. Dat charm is a man, Great Gawd, yes. E's a mans o' monkeys, honey."

It didn't work its spell to hold July, but it played havoc with other young bucks, and with Sister Mary

herself. She brought into the black Street nine sin-children, and assumed charge of a tenth, by sly little Seraphine, not allowing for Unex's little Emma, brought from the chill North.

This record by Scarlet Sister Mary reminds one of O'Neill's "Strange In-

terludes"; but in a tale of white folk, it would have seemed a bit extravagant, even for a society and sophisticated Frenchified story. Yet Mrs. Peterkin pours out the amazing tale as simply as her breath—and makes it seem, as it is, a natural fruition of life among the blacks of that marvelous bit of dark earth she has peopled with such jungle-folk as make it part of our domain in Southern literature. These Negroes bring the jungle with them—and slowly but surely become part of the under-currents of the "Blue Brook" of American life.

There are many lovely and many strong passages in this story that are sufficient themselves to insure its success. Theokritos himself would be glad to have composed the little goat-idyl when Mary is sick again for July, and the goat-mother has given her kid to feed her inexorable human masters, and Unex returns, ill, but a blessing to the stricken mother. And the death of Unex is as pathetically told as Dickens's great scenes of misery.

In the end, Scarlet Sister Mary turns to her emotional religion, and consents to be baptized a second time to wash away her crimson sins. But the author is not sure, nor are we. As the convicted sinner turns from her preacher and sisters in the church, Daddy Cudjoe asks to be given back his "C conjure rag." Mary smiles, shakes her head, and says, to the withered old witch-doctor:

"I'll lend 'em to you when you need 'em, Daddy, but I couldn't gi way my love-charm. E's all I got now to keep me young."

Mrs. Peterkin has done her very best work so far, in "Scarlet Sister Mary," and has perfected a story of rare beauty and allurements. What it lacks in the raw stuff of savage power, as compared with "Black April," it more than makes up for in a finer and a more delightful art. It is certain of becoming a memorable book.

It is published by Bobbs-Merrill

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## SC Author Writes Novel Of Reconstruction Days



Grace Fox Perry of Ridgeland autographing a copy of her novel, "Wall Within the Orbit," the publication of which was noted in her home town by a reception at the Hitching Post. The inscribed copy went to her father (left), W. Marshall Fox of Lodge. Samuel Hopkins Adams, who has a plantation near Beaufort and who attended the affair, described the Ridgeland housewife's work as "alive and real." The novel deals with the Reconstruction era in South Carolina.

Grace Fox Perry of Ridgeland, writer and housewife, has written a new novel of the destruction, despair and defeat left in the wake of the Confederate War. Her novel, "Wall Within the Orbit," has just been released by Vantage Press (\$3.00).

Ever since childhood days, Mrs. Perry has been fascinated by stories of the Reconstruction Period. Her father, now 84, regaled her with tales of those turbulent times, told to him by his father who was a Confederate Army officer, and later captain of a Red Shirt company under Wade Hampton in 1876.

While doing research on a previous book, "Moving Finger of Jasper," published in 1947, Grace Fox Perry obtained old boxes and trunks filled with historical letters

and family papers. From these original sources, she fashioned the framework for her present volume.

Born on her grandfather's farm in the upper part of Colleton County, the author did most of her growing up in Lodge, a town on a branch of the A.C.L. Railroad. She went to Ridgeland to teach school, later married Nelson Perry and settled down to raising a family. Today she has a 24-year old son, a student at the University of South Carolina, as well as a 15-year old daughter.

Aside from her two books, Mrs. Perry, a graduate of Columbia College, has found time to contribute feature articles to the Charleston News and Courier, the Savannah Morning News and the South Carolina Magazine.