Julia suffered from an eye condition known as strabismus, or an "inability of one eye to attain binocular vision with the other because of imbalance of the muscles of the eyeball, called also squint. (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary). Some less-than-kind writers have called her cross-eyed. In her younger years she was not particularly concerned about this slight disability, although it did cause her to tire easily from the strain of either reading or writing. Grant often read novels aloud to her and the rest of their family so that she could save her eyesight, but enjoy the benefits of the stories. As for writing, her poor correspondence habits that caused her husband much anguish could be in part attributed to the difficulties she experienced with close work that required good eyesight.

However, as the star of her Ulysses began to rise, she became more self-conscious about her ocular condition and considered corrective action.

From Julia's *Personal Memoirs* (pp.126-127), the following is what she relates about a visit she made to see Ulysses in St. Louis during the War:

I had often been urged in my girlhood by Dr. [Charles A.] Pope, the most distinguished surgeon in the country at the time, to permit him to make a very simple operation upon my eyes. I had never had the courage to consent, but now that my husband had become so famous I really thought it behooved me to try to look as well as possible. So I consulted the Doctor on this, to me, most delicate subject, but alas! he told me it was too late, too late. I told the General and expressed my regret. He replied: "What in the world put such a thought in your head, Julia?" I said, "Why, you are getting to be such a great man, and I am such a plain little wife. I thought if my eyes were as others are I might not be so very, very plain, Ulys; who knows? He drew me to him and said: "Did I not see you and fall in love with you with these same
eyes? I like them just as they are, and now remember, you are not to interfere
with them. They are mine, and let me tell you, Mrs. Grant, you had better not
make any experiments, as I might not like you half so well with any other
eyes." And I never did, my knight, my Lancelot!*

*Quoted from The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant with the permission of John
Y. Simon on behalf of Frank J. Williams and the directors of the Ulysses S. Grant

According to Ishbel Ross (The General's Wife, p. 221) Julia brought up the issue
again when she and Ulysses were living in the White House, and together they
searched for a well-qualified surgeon to perform the surgery. Ross quotes LaSalle
Corbell Pickett who, along with her husband the famous Confederate general George
Pickett, visited the Grants in the White House. It is not clear from her telling if this
incident actually happened when the Grants were in the White House or if they were
retelling the story from the St. Louis incident during the War. The following is what
she wrote, but the incident may be entirely fictitious:

[Grant said], "We had consulted the best surgeons and had been assured that it
was a very simple thing and not at all dangerous, so we decided to have it done.
As the time grew near I got to worrying over it, and the more I thought of it the
more I did not want my wife's eyes changed even the least little bit from what
they had always been. Arrangements had been made; the hour for the operation
was almost at hand. We were alone. I stood watching her collecting the last
little odds and ends and stealing my pictures and the children's and putting
them into her handbag under her shawl. Everything was ready and we started
from the room. My hand was on the knob of the door, when I stopped and said,
'My dear, I am very selfish and ought not to say this, but I don't want your eyes
changed. They look just as they did the first time I ever saw them, the same
eyes I looked into when I fell in love with you, the same that looked up into
mine and told me that my love was returned. I have seen that expression in
them through all the years and I don't want it to be lost. You might look better
to other people, but to me you are prettier as you are. So, if you don't mind,
please let's keep your dear eyes just as they always have been.'
Julia usually did not like to face the camera when having her picture taken. The picture to the right, taken during the Grant's trip abroad is unusual. It shows that her eye condition did not detract from her appearance as much as she believed. Picture courtesy of Carole Adams, University of Central Florida, scanned from *U. S. Grant Album*, by Lawrence A. Frost.