

APRIL ASHLEY, a former merchant seaman who had a sex-change operation and went through a marriage ceremony with Mr Arthur Corbett, heir to a peerage, was the central figure in an historic Divorce Court action.

Mr Justice Ormrod said it was the first occasion on which a court in England has been called upon to decide the sex of an individual.

In his judgment he said that Mr Corbett asked for a declaration that a marriage ceremony in Gibraltar on Sept 10, 1963, between himself and April Ashley was null and void because Miss Ashley was a person of the male sex at the time.

Alternatively he alleged that the marriage was never consummated owing to the incapacity or wilful refusal of Miss Ashley and asked for a nullity decree.

In her answer Miss Ashley denied that she was of the male sex at the time and asserted that she was of the female sex.

She denied that she was incapable of or had wilfully refused to consummate the marriage.

She admitted that for many years she had been regarded as a male, but had undergone an operation for the construction of a vagina before the marriage ceremony, and alleged that Mr Corbett was aware of all the material facts before the ceremony and was therefore not entitled to a nullity decree on the ground of incapacity or wilful refusal.

Miss Ashley, in turn, asked for a nullity decree on either of those grounds.

The Judge said that April Ashley was born on April 29, 1935, in Liverpool and registered at birth as a boy in the name of George Jamieson, and brought up as a boy.

In 1951, at the age of 16,

he joined the Merchant Navy.

As George Jamieson he did one and a half voyages as a merchant seaman before being put ashore at San Francisco and admitted to hospital after taking an overdose of tablets. He was subsequently returned to this country.

In 1953 he was referred by his general practitioner to the psychiatric department of Walton Hospital, Liverpool. Hospital records showed no abnormality other than a "womanish appearance" and "little bodily and facial hair."

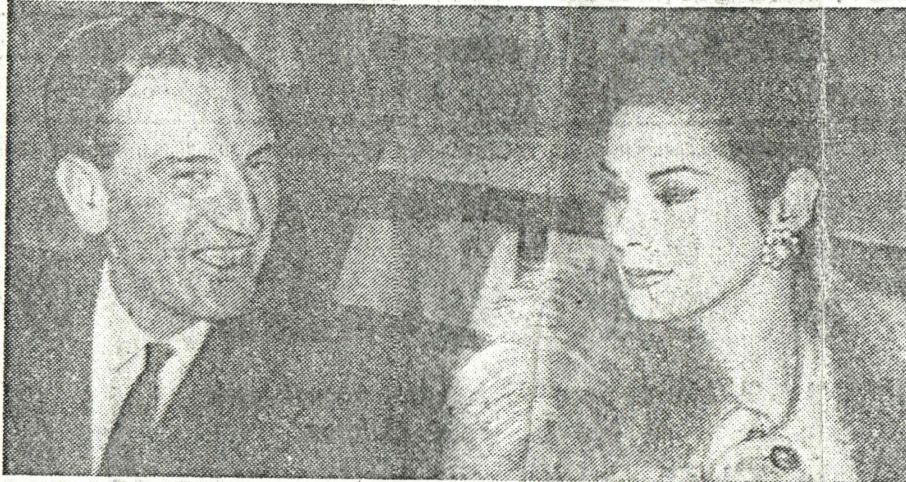
In interviews he expressed an intense desire to be a woman which, he said, he had experienced since childhood, and told of various homosexual experiences on board ship.

In 1956 Ashley went to the South of France, where he met a well-known troupe of male female impersonators, normally based at the Carousel night-club in Paris. Later he became a member of the troupe.

By this time he was taking the female sex hormone oestrogen regularly, to encourage the development of the breasts and of a feminine type of physique. He was known as "Toni/April."

After about four years at the Carousel he was introduced to a certain Dr Burou who practised at Casablanca, and on May 11, 1960, underwent, at Dr

Judgment on April



ARTHUR CORBETT and APRIL ASHLEY: When he first saw her he could not believe it

Burou's hands, a so-called "sex-change operation."

[The details were explained by the judge.]

Following the operation Miss Ashley returned to London now calling herself April Ashley, and dressing and living as a female. In evidence she stated that after the operation she had had sexual relations with at least one man.

In November, 1960, about six months after the operation, Mr Corbett and Miss Ashley met for the first time. He was then aged 40, married and living with

his wife and four children, but sexually unhappy and abnormal.

In the witness-box he described his sexual experience with apparent frankness and without obvious embarrassment. He was, in fact, an unusually good witness, answering all the questions put to him carefully, and without prevarication or evasion.

He said that he had had sexual relations with a large number of women before his first marriage, and with others, both during it, and after it was dissolved in 1962. He also

described his sexual deviations.

From a comparatively early age he had experienced a desire to dress up in female clothes. In the early stages of his marriage he had done so in his wife's presence on a few occasions. Subsequently he had dressed as a woman four or five times a year, keeping it from his wife, but the urge continued.

With considerable insight he said: "I didn't like what I saw. You want the fantasy to appear right. It utterly failed to appear right in my eyes. These remarks were highly relevant to the... understanding... of the human aspects of this unusual case."

From about 1948 onwards his interest in transvestism increased; at first it was mainly literary, attracting him to pornographic book-shops, but gradually he began to make contact with people of similar tendencies.

He became more and more involved in the society of sexual deviants and interested in sexual deviations. In this world he became familiar with its ramifications and its personalities, among whom he heard of Toni/April as a female impersonator at the Carousel, which he described as the Mecca of every female impersonator.

EVENTUALLY, through an American transvestite known as "Louise," he got in touch with her and they met for the first time on Nov 19, 1960, at his invitation for lunch at the Caprice Restaurant.

His description of this first meeting contained "the key to the rest of this essentially pathetic, but almost incredible story."

By this time he was aware that April Ashley as she was now calling herself had been a man and had undergone a so-called "sex change operation." When he first saw her he could not believe it.

He said he was mesmerised by her. This was so much more than I could ever hope to be. The reality was far greater than my fantasy.

This coincidence of fantasy with reality was to determine Mr Corbett's behaviour towards Miss Ashley over the next three years or more.

Miss Ashley's reaction to him appeared to have been largely passive. After the meeting in November, 1960, they saw more and more of each other, meeting daily and sometimes twice a day. He had originally introduced himself to her under an assumed name, but soon disclosed his real identity.

Miss Ashley "in drabs and drabs," disclosed her history to him.

According to him his

original motive in seeking an introduction to her was essentially transvestite in character, but quite soon he developed for her the interest of a man for a woman.

He said she looked like a woman, dressed like a woman and acted like a woman. He disclosed his true identity to show that his feelings had become those of a full man in love with a girl, not those of a transvestite in love with a transsexual.

On the other hand, it was common ground that before the marriage ceremony, nearly three years



APRIL ASHLEY as a boy of 16

later, there was no sexual activity in a physical sense between them at all.

At the most, their relationship went no further than kissing and some very mild petting. At no time did she permit him to handle her naked breasts or any other part of her body.

His letters to her showed a similar emotional situation, affectionate, yet quite passionless, with continual emphasis on marriage and the pleasure which Mr Corbett felt in thinking of Miss Ashley as the future Lady Rowellan.

Miss Ashley agreed with his account of their relationship, except that she claimed that on one single occasion, in a fit of jealousy in Paris in 1961, he attempted to assault her sexually. Her description of the incident did not suggest to the Judge that there was anything particularly sexual about it.

She said that she never had any real feeling for Mr Corbett and had been his "nurse" for three years. She obviously found him a difficult and perplexing person.

"She says, and some of the petitioner's letters bear her out," said the Judge. "That his emotions swung about like a pendulum, from feeling jealous of her as a woman, by which, I think, she meant, jealous of her success in adopting the female role which he often wished he could adopt also, to jealous feelings about other men who were attracted to her."

"Listening to each party describing this strange relationship, my principal impression was that it had little or nothing in common with any heterosexual relationship which I could recall hearing about in a fairly extensive experience of this court.

He is a man who is

extremely prone to all kinds of sexual fantasies and practices. He is an unreliable yardstick by which to measure Miss Ashley's emotional and sexual responses. As a further indication of the unreality of his feelings for her, it is common ground that he introduced her to his wife and family."

By September, 1961, the situation between Mr Corbett and his wife had become impossible and a separation was arranged.

Meanwhile, with his assistance, Miss Ashley had changed her name to April Ashley by Deed Poll and obtained a passport in that name. Attempts to persuade the Superintendent Registrar to change her birth certificate, however, failed.

AT some stage after the operation the Ministry of National Insurance issued her a woman's insurance card, and now treated her as a woman for National Insurance purposes.

During 1961 she worked successfully as a female model. Later that year Mr Corbett decided to live in Spain and bought a villa and a night club, called the Jacaranda, at Marbella.

In December they went together to Marbella on the basis that they would share the villa but not sleep together, and eventually marry when his divorce came through.

Miss Ashley stayed about a week and then left for a while returning later for about a month and then leaving again. This pattern of coming and going continued for a long time.

When she was in Marbella she slept at the villa and Mr Corbett at the club.

In 1962 they became the subject of intense Press publicity, culminating in a series of articles in the *News of the World* in which Miss Ashley told her life story in considerable detail, most of which seemed

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