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April Ashley interviewed by Maureen Cleave, page 20

FOREVER APRIL

MAUREEN CLEAVE interviews April Ashley, whose book about her life as a man and a woman is being published this week



Dennis Waugh

Above and right: the child and the woman - shy little George Jamieson surrounded by schoolmates on VE Day, aged 10, and the immensely grand April Ashley today, outside her large house in Hay-on-Wye

April Ashley gave a lecture recently to some law students in Cardiff; her subject was 'Transsexuals and the Law'. She was warned that some might leave early to catch their buses home, but they packed the lecture theatre to the ceiling and not a soul stirred until the very end.

'All these young people,' she said, 'coming up with the most constructive questions - I was terribly flattered. It was just like the Academy Awards.' She always spots the dramatic potential in any situation. Having failed all her life to be an ordinary person, she feels quite at home in the limelight.

The National Council for Civil Liberties is helping her to prepare a case about the rights of transsexuals to take to the European Commission for Human Rights at Strasbourg. Though this might mean more of the limelight it would also mean detailed consideration of her own human condition which is not entirely satisfactory. 'You can't squander your life,' she said, 'helping total strangers; one doesn't want to be reminded day in day out that one was a freak, and still is in

a way.'

People have changed their sex through operations since 1933 and they can now do it on the National Health. April Ashley changed from male to female at a cost of £2,000 in Casablanca in 1960; and then with wonderful boldness became a successful fashion model (specialising in underclothing) and married into the English upper classes.

Her life 20 years on is much altered and, after two heart attacks, much reduced. She lives in Hay-on-Wye, a colourful personage among the many attracted to this small market town on the Welsh border. 'It's like Clochemerle round here,' said a local publican, but April has her place; she strides about in improbable pastel shades and high-heeled wellington boots, got up to the nines to buy a pound of mince, Flora at her heels. Flora is a whippet bitch the colour of pale coral which is also now the colour of April's hair. April and Flora are inseparable; they adore each other. 'What is it, Flora?' says April. 'Tell Mummy then.'

Before they sally forth to buy Flora's lunch, an hour will have been spent

putting several ounces of make-up on to April's face. 'It's discipline,' she says. 'I have the blankest face in the world and every day I paint a different picture on it.'

For an evening sortie with the slightest pretensions, she will dress in operatic style in cloak and feather, handmade Brussels lace, hand-painted silk,

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gorgeous dresses by St Laurent, Balmain and Thea Porter from her glorious past. 'My full evening glamour,' she calls it. She mastered the techniques of being a woman in the early Sixties and it is that formal groomed look she has retained.

The locals view her with mild apprehension and concern. They know what April's doctor has said: that she must lead a calm and ordered life and that if

she returns to her old ways, bucketing around London, she will be dead within the month. But she still manages to live it up in Hay-on-Wye. 'I've been going like the clappers for a fortnight,' she said. 'Lots of people to stay and beer for breakfast, so I knew it was time to call a halt. I shall spend the rest of the week in bed. One is a drunkard; *not* an alcoholic; a drunkard is a happy person who drinks because he is shy; an alcoholic is ill.'

She does feel that she has some kind of position to maintain. 'When I come into a restaurant, I live up to expectations. I am not a midget' - this was a slighting reference to a famous but small film star who had come to live in the region - 'I am tall and I am grand and I am glamorous and I never let anybody down. Nobody looks more of a star than I do.'

This is true. She is immensely, carelessly grand and grows grander by the hour as the night wears on. I had admired a little pink jug on the mantelpiece: 'Take it, darling,' she said with a wave of a manicured hand.

A report on her carriage and deportment would read, *Excellent*: she holds her chin in the air and to turn her head



moves not from the neck but from the waist. This takes time and is impressive.

We were going out to dinner nearby. She wore black chiffon, dominating black earrings, black fishnet stockings and a long black shawl. On her wedding finger she wore her wedding ring, her engagement ring and an eternity ring, all that remains to her of her marriage to Arthur Corbett, now Lord Rowallan. She is 47 years old, 5ft 10½in tall and has a low full bosom, a tremulous Vivien Leigh-type mouth, a perfect nose and faultlessly regular features. Her legs are terrific but what else remains of her famous beauty is masked by the layers of make-up daily applied. She has a deep cracked voice, perfect for pronouncements.

Did we really need a taxi, I asked. 'We could walk,' said April majestically, 'but we *shan't*.' And Flora and I followed meekly in her Mitsouk-scented wake to the waiting vehicle.

But for all this she is a cosy person, full of sympathy and wisdom, and very kind. This is because she has been through the mill. Her friend, the writer Duncan Fallowell, has helped her write her autobiography and made a

splendid job of it. He has called it 'April Ashley's Odyssey' and Cape are publishing it on her birthday, which is 29 April.

It is a good title because she has come a very long way. When she became a woman, she burnt all old photographs but she reckoned without her mother, Ada, who raked up a col-

'I could never look in the mirror because I was a total freak. I was supposed to be one thing and I was turning into another'

lection to sell to the *Daily Express* for £5. 'How cheap it is to be betrayed,' said April, but she is in fact philosophical about her childhood in Liverpool which was absolutely wretched.

The child, we are told, is father of the man, but one searches in vain for traces of Flora's grand mistress in the shy little George Jamieson aged 10 on VE Day with his Union Jack. His

father was a drunken sailor and his mother had nine children far too close together to have time for the weakling George; he had a calcium deficiency and he maddened her by refusing to eat most foods or drink school milk - the only thing that was free.

The children wore clogs and the family kept the coal in the bath. 'To stop it being nicked,' said April. 'Everyone nicked your coal. The nuns at school were beastly; they rattled us between the knees with rulers and they tied dusters over our clogs and made us skate along and polish their floors. He was cruelly bullied by the other children; they stamped on his feet and broke them and they tied him up and left him in empty air-raid shelters. At home he was silent as a ghost, an embarrassment to his brothers and sisters because he was, in a word, odd.

'You must understand, darling, it was a terrible thing to have a kid like me in a place like Liverpool. We were recovering from the war and people weren't interested in peculiarities. I was terribly, terribly thin and very, very shy, even of myself. I could never look in the mirror because I was a total freak. I was supposed to be one thing

Above: left, April modelling in 1961; right, with Les Lee (left, *en femme*) and Margaret Lockwood (centre) at Juan-les-Pins, 1957. Right: aged 23, on stage at Le Carrousel, a famous nightclub in Paris for male and female impersonators



and I was turning into another. I had no beard to shave, my voice wasn't breaking and I had spontaneous growth of breasts – how could I ever be a man? I hated myself; I was in despair and there was no one I could turn to.' In these days of counselling and self-realisation, when all the closet doors are wide open, it is hard to imagine the isolation.

'My mother didn't like me but I understand why. She was not intelligent, just street-wise, and we stole her youth. She loved dancing but for nine months of every year she was fat as houses, and she lost all her hair and most of her teeth through working near TNT in the Fazakerly bomb factory during the war.'

(April did, however, love her father and was the only one of his sons to attend his funeral, though she was by then, ironically, a woman; she wore a dazzling canary-yellow suit. As for her mother, she does not know whether she is living or dead.)

At the age of 15½, George Jamieson, like his father and brothers, went to sea. A convinced cradle Catholic, he attempted suicide three times in full expectation of hell-fire; he was treated with male hormones and ECT. It wasn't until he got to London in the early Fifties that he met others as odd as himself, and much odder: Big Gloria from Leeds, Little Gloria from Liverpool, Pussy and Ernestine, Tallulah and Scheherezade – they all lived together in Nevern Square, London SW5, and these were student days for George. For the first time he made friends, though not for life because so many of them died. It is here that the character of April, as she now is, begins to emerge: brisk, practical, a friend in need.

'Darling, I never knew *what* I'd find when I got back from work at Waitrose: negroes – goolies we called them – all over the place in a cloud of pot. It was like a pantomime every day, fantastic, really great. They were all priceless, particularly Tallulah and Ernestine, really witty, but all their talents were channelled into being high camp. I was the only one who did a day's work, slicing bacon in a white overall, and I'm sure that's why I'm still alive. They thought I was very strange because I never indulged in any of the nonsense they used to get up to; but I was very puritanical and I knew at the back of my mind what I was going to do – which was one day be a woman. So I wasn't going to have any shabbiness; it was a form of snobbery on my part.'

Once they all took a holiday in Jersey and poor Tallulah kept trying to

drown himself, to be fished out by April, who was the only one who could swim. 'I used to thank God for my bronze life-saving medal,' she said, and she summoned finger-bowls for us to use after the smoked prawns.

She thinks all this would make a wonderful musical and she could be right. The scene now shifts upmarket to Paris, to the Carrousel, a famous nightclub for male and female impersonators. George has become Toni April and he enters a very grand world indeed. He is taken to an expensive doctor four times a week for shots of oestrogen to promote breast development, and to Dior and Balmain to buy clothes. Pussy and Ernestine are replaced by Bambi and Ruby and Everest and by the glittering star Coccinelle.

Coccinelle had mink coats dyed pink and lavender, the most beautiful feet in the world, an outsize artistic temperament and practically no nose. It had been gradually whittled away in five nose operations. (Self-mutilation, April said, like suicide, was fairly common in these circles.) Coccinelle's real name was Jacques but to call him this was a calculated insult.

To upstage was second nature to him. 'He would infuriate all the big movie stars of France by arriving at a première and dropping a boob out. Boobs weren't so common in the Fifties. Well, after that, who wanted to look at Martine Carol?'

It was Coccinelle who first sampled the talents of Dr Burou in Casablanca, to return in triumph and get married in the cathedral of Notre Dame.

April measured herself against all these wondrous creatures and did not find herself wanting. Indeed she had the edge: she looked equally good in daylight whereas the others looked like clowns. She didn't even have the beautiful Bambi's problem which was a receding hairline. 'I could always wear my blue-black hair drawn back in a classic style. I was exquisite, darling, slim shoulders, wonderful legs and incredible skin. Nobody could beat my skin; I could be on the booze all night and go out the next day and be a sensation. Bosom the perfect size considering how tall I am – just a mouthful I would say. Fantastic eyelashes that framed my face . . . Bambi and I were ladies and we never tarted ourselves for anybody, though there were millions of stage door johnnies and sugar daddies with peculiar interests.'

Salvador Dali's peculiar interest was to paint her as a hermaphrodite, but again she was too shy. 'Besides, one didn't know whether one was or not. Hermaphrodites have both sets of

organs – they're incredibly rare but they do exist.'

The operation in Casablanca – despite the excruciating pain, the danger and the after-effects which lasted for two years – enabled her to be *de facto* what she already seemed. She put it with simple force: 'I knew the pinnacle of happiness, a joy beyond words.' She became April Ashley, April being the month of her birth and Ashley after Ashley Wilkes in 'Gone With The Wind'.

She has a warning about this operation: it is only suitable for the genuine transsexual, the person who wishes to be another sex. It is not suitable for the transvestite, or the homosexual. 'Some people don't know what they are,' she said, 'and they have the operation and it's a disaster. Even after the operation the transsexual must accept that he was never naturally male and can never be naturally female either.'

She came back to London, took up modelling, was taken up by smart friends and had the time of her life. She always had – she still has – a capacity to enjoy herself. If you decided to fly to Geneva in your private plane for lunch, then April was your girl. Sarah Churchill, Peter O'Toole, Omar Sharif, and all the people with time on their hands in London, Rome, Paris, Nice and the south of Spain found April ready to share it with them.

She is still happy to stay up all night. She is good at talking people through their nervous breakdowns, and not long ago went to California to do this for a friend. She was enjoying her share of the swinging Sixties when a Sunday newspaper revealed her male origins; it was the end of her modelling career and what she always felt was a promising start in films. Her name was removed from the credit titles of 'The Road to Hong Kong' and once more she was a curiosity; people poked her in the bosom and tweaked her hair. Taxi drivers still ask her if she has orgasms; teenage boys sometimes jeer at her in the street. This is particularly sad for her because she loves children and young people.

Then in 1970, after a long and explicit court case, came the annulment of her marriage to Arthur Corbett on the ground that at the time of the marriage, and at all times since, she was a male.

'I felt stripped, denuded, humiliated in front of the whole world and I thought I was going to die. To have been through all that, and to find myself at the end of it a non-person. Did you know that if we are raped, we have no rights? My case unmarried all

the thousands of transsexuals living in this country.'

The verdict was almost the end of her. She lost so much weight that she was ill. She went to a health farm where she heard the man in the cabin next door saying on the telephone: 'Guess who's next door to me? That monster April Ashley.'

She rallied at once. 'It was anger that saved me; it shot through me like adrenalin. And when I came out of my cabin the next morning, I gave him a look of death! One could well imagine it.'

At this stage she thought we might leave and go to the pub, and we made a stylish exit with the remains of all the food: the remains of her own steak for her lunch the next day, the remains of mine for Flora, and the wine for cooking. We settled ourselves in the Blue Boar where Flora and April were greeted by several more dogs, and she talked about how she discovered Oxford. Someone invited her down for the weekend, when she was feeling low after all this, and off she went in a chinchilla cloak. A Georgette Heyer scene sprang to life before her very eyes: 'The room was full of candelabra, and as I entered all these beautiful young men in velvet and lace ruffles rose to their feet . . .'

This is the clue to April: she is hopelessly romantic, just as the heroines in the women's magazines used to be before they discovered their rights. Arthur was not a good husband but he had a habit of *filling the house with flowers* by way of an apology and she will still tell you this in his favour.

Other lovers she has to prompt. The love of her life was a beautiful young student called Edward Madok, now dead, like so many people in April's story, and they set up house together in a flat opposite Foyle's in the Charing Cross Road. 'Edward,' she used to have to say, 'I have cooked you a four-course dinner and you must see to it that there is wine on the table.' She had an affair in Florida last year and this is how she describes it: 'He booked me into the best hotel. Every night I wore something new and different for him and my scent was exquisite. "Darling," I said to him, helping him to the white wine, chilled in a bucket of ice, "you deserve this . . ."'

It was lovely, she said, to have a man to look after you, but it is usually April who does the looking after. She often befriends elderly people whom others have forgotten, perhaps in a tiresome old age. One such was Viva King, a society hostess whose fascinating friends such as the Sitwells and Augustus John and Ronald Firbank

had gone before; and another was Charlie Simpson who owned a garage in Hay-on-Wye.

April was in Hay-on-Wye recovering from a severe heart attack brought on

by 32 martinis a night and lots of *Martini* restaurant in London. Charlie was 32 and she used to mow his lawn for him and help in the garden. One day she said she would have to be off back to London.

'Charlie said that if I left he would die. I had no idea he had come to rely on me so much. He was such a sweet-heart and I suddenly felt responsible for him. I love old people; if you reject the wisdom of age, you are a very stupid person. So I said to Charlie: "I had no idea you were going to die," and I moved in to take care of him. I must say, if I'd known what was going to happen I would have run a mile. He never slept the last year of his life, he was so ill. He was always falling out of bed, once on to the electric fire. It almost killed me but I stuck it out.'

She finds it quite interesting that she should be good at taking care of people. 'I knew no love at all as a child and I always felt a stiffening of the back if anyone touched me. I longed for a proper mother and father, yet Charlie and Viva weren't father and mother to me – I was mother to them.'

When Charlie Simpson died he left her his house. She is doing it up and making it look nice but one wonders whether she will settle.

She leads a quiet life, except when people come and stay; she reads, stays in bed, takes Flora for walks, goes round to the pub when lonely or bored. 'Darling, I am a recluse,' she said, but she seizes any diversion. I asked her what she lived on, thinking she would not mind; after all, we had discussed most things. But she was shocked. 'Darling, it's *incredibly* rude to talk about money. You really mustn't ask.' It turned out that Viva King had left her some money. She doesn't actually spend very much.

Her great disappointment is that she never became a film star; as it is, she thinks she should be written into 'Crossroads' as herself; she thinks 'Crossroads' needs her. She would love her Odyssey to be turned into a musical. One day she might sell the house and buy a yacht and sail the world; she gets all the brochures for yachts.

'Most people,' she said, 'go through their lives dreading traumas but freaks are born with theirs and they have passed the test of life. I would like to sail the world because always at the back of my mind I think there's something marvellous out there for me.' ■