ROBERT GRAVES

A MAN MAY NOT MARRY HIS...

YOUR CORRESPONDENT, TELEPHONING from 'The Twelve Commandments', a charming little public house not a hundred yards from the gates of Lambeth Palace, reports that deep concern has been caused in that edifice by an examination of the quarterly report of the Archbishops' Standing Committee on Matrimony. This highly technical and still secret report, signed by Prebendary Palk, D.D., the biggest troublemaker in the whole Anglican Confession, emphasizes certain deficiencies in the Table of Kindred and Affinity: a legal document which your correspondent in his childhood used to study attentively during sermon time as a relaxation from the ardours of the Litany, and on which he is still something of an expert.

Half an hour ago, the bald and booming Prebendary unbosomed himself to your correspondent, who had invited him to a double gin-and-lime in the discreet bar-parlour. 'The Church,' he said, 'has hitherto been content to accept Genesis i, 27: "male and female created he them" as definitive; to believe that every human being is predestined before birth to one sex or the other. Insufficient credit has been given, however, to the mystery and evolutionary wonder of the Divine Scheme, and the remarkable skill with which, ahem, Providence has been pleased to endow certain outstanding surgeons and physicians. It has now been proved that a man or woman, even after consummating his or her marriage by an act of procreation, may experience a partial change of sex which these physicians and surgeons are empowered to make total.'

Pressed tactfully by your correspondent, the Prebendary enlarged on this theme: 'The Standing Committee,' he allowed himself to be quoted as saying, 'are by no means satisfied that the prohibited degrees listed in the Table of Kindred and Affinity have been defined with sufficient exactitude to prevent what may seem -- I must emphasize, seem -- scandalous marriages from taking place: unions which are, prima facie, incestuous in spirit, if not in letter. It is, for instance, a law of almost platitudinous force that a man may not marry his deceased wife's grandmother, nor (as he may more readily be tempted to do, if his grandfather has married a young girl and left her all the family cash) his deceased grandfather's wife. Yet since a certificate, signed by two or three qualified doctors and approved by a magistrate, now enables a man legally to register himself at Somerset House as a woman, what -- pray, tell me that? -- prevents him, as the Law stands, from marrying his deceased wife's grandfather, or his own grandmother's husband who may well be in his vigorous sixties?'

'Provided always that there is no consanguinity, and the spouses evince a genuine desire for the procreation of children,' your correspondent put in, sympathetically but

doubtfully, from behind a pink gin.

'Quite, quite,' agreed the Prebendary, who is, by the way, a confirmed bachelor. 'Though in a civil marriage, you know, the registrar does not insist on the moral safeguard you very properly mention. But the question arises: should such a marriage, even between Christians of the highest principles and the deepest devotion for each other, be solemnized in a church? What troubles us committee-men is that, if such a man, now legally a woman, has been christened as a man, and if, worse -- or I should say "better", I suppose -- he has solemnized a Church marriage and begotten children on his wife now deceased, he must necessarily remain a male in the Church's sight, since these sacraments cannot be annulled or disregarded, even if the subject becomes a declared renegade to the faith. This consideration implies that in accordance with I Corinthians xi, 4, he would be obliged to appear in church with his head uncovered, not covered as in verse 5.'

'Don't let a little thing like that trouble you, Prebendary. In these days of empty pews, parsons admit women bareheaded, barefooted, and even in two-piece bathing suits. Besides, ritualistic changes of sex among physically normal women are already legalized in this country.'

'Ha! How's that?' he asked sharply.

'Well,' explained your ingenious correspondent. 'One Sunday, Jane Doe, a Bishop's daughter, greets the Queen with a low curtsy when, as Head of the Church, she lays the foundation stone of a new cathedral. On the following Sunday, the same Jane Doe, a sergeant-major in the W.R.A.C., assists at a Church Parade and salutes the Queen, as her Colonel-in-Chief. The salute is, in theory, a removal of the hat, which Jane Doe performs as an honorary man, but which would have been forbidden her, as a Bishop's daughter, on the previous Sunday.'

Here the Prebendary tried to argue the toss, but your correspondent reminded him that the symbolic removal of the hat is emphasized by Queen's Regulations, which make it a punishable offence to salute bareheaded.

Prebendary Palk then grunted with less than conviction, and returned to his marriage hypothesis: 'Granted that the Divine Law, as starkly laid down in Leviticus xx, 13, prevents the Church from recognizing a physical union between man and man; yet if one partner in this union be physically a female, is not the spirit of the Law observed? And would this spirit not be flouted were the union one between a woman who was legally and physically a man, and a man who had retained his physical male nature?'

Your blushing correspondent was obliged to agree that, in his opinion, flouting would have occurred.

'And, to take an extreme instance: what of a marriage solemnized in church between a man who has been physically and legally, but not spiritually, changed to a woman, and a woman who has been physically and legally, but not spiritually, changed to a man? I can see no possible moral objection to a match of this sort, because the spouses belong to opposite sexes whichever way you look at it. But, if the ex-woman prove her intrinsic masculinity by begetting children on the ex-man, and if the ex-man proves his intrinsic femininity by bearing and suckling these, to which of the two are the offspring to yield obedience as the spiritual male authority (Genesis iii, 16) in the household? And which of the two should be churched after the birth of each legitimate offspring?'

'Search me,' replied your correspondent gravely, signing to the tapster, who at once refilled the Prebendary's glass. 'Perhaps the decision would be better left to the individual conscience?'

'These are indeed thorny problems,' declared Prebendary Palk, 'but they must be resolutely faced, and not only by the Protestant Churches. Heaven knows what the Vatican reaction will be, but only yesterday I was talking to a Greek Orthodox dignitary -- the Lesbian Patriarch in point of fact...'

'Off record,' interrupted your correspondent boldly, 'what counsel would you give to a legalized ex-man if he were to fall honourably in love with his deceased grandmother's husband and find his feelings tenderly reciprocated?'

'Strictly off record,' the Prebendary answered, venting a non-ecclesiastical chuckle, 'I should advise him to get on with it while the going is good, publish the banns in a remote parish, and not disclose the relationship to the officiating priest. It is, after all, as the Chief of Sinners pointed out, better to marry than to burn; and whatever legislation may be called for will not retrospectively illegitimize the offspring of such a union -- we can promise your friend that.'

'I assure you, the case is quite hypothetical,' your correspondent stammered, meeting the Prebendary's shrewdly curious gaze with some embarrassment.