

A ROYAL REVENGE □ □

(Originally broadcast on BBC Radio, May 2002)

Once upon a time in a land far away, there lived a beautiful queen named Hermione. This queen lived in a lovely large palace with many servants, but she was very sad. She had not seen her husband King Vidor for many days. Although the size of their palace made it easy to lose track of one another, she had become convinced that he was avoiding her on purpose. Whenever she called on his chambers, the king's attendants would hem and haw. "Oh, your majesty, his majesty is out hunting snipes," they would say, or "His majesty's off bear-baiting with the Duke of Wallyballoo."

She knew these were lies, of course, which only made Hermione more sad. Once upon a time—not the current time, you understand, but once upon a previous time—she and King Vidor had been very much in love. They had had the most marvelous wedding, with an enormous guest list that included, for safety's sake, every fairy, witch, and media mogul in the land.

But that was nearly four years ago now, and the king's vows to love her "forever and a day" were fading like yesterday's fairy dust. Hermione had even given Vidor an heir right on schedule, little Prince Lithwick, as cute and clever as a boy could be. But even this was driving them apart. The king had begun throwing lavish parties, ostensibly to find a suitable wife for the young prince. But Queen Hermione knew that it was merely a ploy that allowed the king to meet ambitious and lovely young maidens for himself. After all, Lithwick was still in nappies, so one would expect a wife for him to be younger than 17. Moreover, the prerequisite that she be "open-minded and adventurous about relationships" seemed entirely inappropriate as well.

Queen Hermione had to face facts: King Vidor was having a full-blown midlife crisis. Always vain and insecure, he had grown restless in their marriage and was using his royal position to gain ungentlemanly advantage over other women. This depressed her majesty so much that she called on her sister Hepsibah, who was queen in the second kingdom down on the right. They shared their stories over tea and biscuits.

"I don't know what to do," Queen Hermione complained. "My husband thinks he's still a prince. He's got no concept of 'happily ever after.'"

"Kings are all scum," said her sister bitterly. "They're all prince charmings when they're young. Promise you anything to get you in the bedchamber. Then, once you've popped out an heir or two, it's farewell old queen, hello Spanish Infanta."

Hermione protested, "Surely they're not all terrible. What about King Wilberforce,

that nice monarch in Garlandia?"

"That 'nice monarch'," snorted Hepsibah, "sent his wife on a fact-finding mission to the Inescapable Frost Mountains of Doom, then started hitting on some miller's daughter who said she could spin straw into gold."

"Well, what about that gallant Emperor Septimius? He always dresses his wife in such fine clothes."

"Yes, as long as he keeps the finer clothes for himself," said her sister. "Word is, he's gone off the deep end. He arranged some sort of royal pageant to show off a new set of regal robes he'd commissioned, then proceeded to walk through the entire city as naked as a dragon whelp. I tell you, it's pretty hard to maintain the divine right of kings when you insist on parading the crown jewels to everyone like that."

Queen Hermione scowled and had another sip of tea. Her sister's bitterness was understandable. A few years earlier, Hepsibah had married a widowed king, and was now continually bickering with her stepdaughter. This stepdaughter made some terrible accusations against the queen—even that Hepsibah had tried to have her killed—and now this headstrong teenager had pledged herself to being some kind of eco-warrior and was living with some strange polygamy cult in the forest. That is, assuming the seven little weirdoes had even bothered to marry her.

Hepsibah rang for the servants to clear the dishes. "I think the Queen of Hearts over in Wonderland has it right," she said. "You can't display any weakness, even for a moment, or they'll ride roughshod over you. 'Off with their heads,' she screams—pretty sound plan, if you ask me."

"Isn't there a better way? I mean, the Queen of Hearts, you know..."

"I know what you're going to say," said Hepsibah. "Those rumors have been floating around for years. Strong women get labeled that by insecure men. So what if she likes rugby? Sister, Dear, if you want to put your king back in his place, then you've got to come up with a plan."

"Suppose this is just a passing fancy... "

"Hermione, listen," interrupted her sister. "You're 23 years old. More than half your life is over. If the king has begun drooling over younger wenches, you don't have much time to act."

So Queen Hermione and her sister began to scheme. Hepsibah, always the studious one, was a practitioner of the black arts. She knew all about poisons, spells, disguises and dubious accounting practices. She offered these services to

Queen Hermione and began to list a number of spells she could cast upon the king, each more dreadful than the last. They had a good laugh as they imagined torturing the king in various ways, especially having him fall in love with his breakfast every morning. But Queen Hermione only wanted to humble the king, not harm him, so they deferred breaking out the heavy alchemy and discussed other alternatives.

Hepsibah had once owned an enchanted mirror that would truthfully answer any question that was asked it. But owning one of these sounds a lot better than actually having it around. After asking the mirror for the umpteenth time, "Does this ermine-trimmed robe make my bum look fat?", Hepsibah had junked the mirror and replaced it with a magic public relations advisor. Now, she only got as many truthful answers as a royal personage could reasonably be expected to handle.

So the two majesties sought the advice of the magic PR advisor. This spin doctor, whose name was Marnie, had many assistants and polltakers at her disposal. Marnie consulted her mystical charts and cosmic focus groups, and prepared an extensive report outlining how Queen Hermione could take her story to her loving subjects without making it appear that she was being disloyal to the king.

"First off, Queenie darling," said Marnie, "we need to establish that you're a caring, sensitive person, that other people's problems are your problems too, no matter how wretched they are. Otherwise, this whole operation won't fly."

"I do care about other people's problems," insisted Hermione.

"Fine, great, whatever. That will give us a leg up. First, we'll need to establish some charities that will get you some publicity. I've set up a breakfast meeting with the royal treasurer for tomorrow morning."

So Queen Hermione went on a PR offensive and took the lead in establishing a number of charities around the kingdom. The first of these was a fund for battered, imprisoned or wrongfully enchanted women called the Rapunzel Fund. While many conservative commentators (most notably Bluebeard) argued that such charities should be a private sector initiative, it was very popular among the middle-class artisans and boosted the Queen's approval ratings tremendously. This was followed by an appearance before the Royal College of Barbers and Surgeons, at which Queen Hermione argued forcefully that sulfur poultices and leech bleedings be made available to all her subjects, regardless of their ability to pay. Later, to prove she wasn't just a bookish policy nerd but also had a playful nature, the Queen posed for portraits (very tastefully, of course) that were printed in a popular series of playing cards. When these high-profile actions had reaped a reasonable amount of goodwill, Marnie the Magic Spin Doctor said:

"Right , Hermy dear, well done. Now..."

"Excuse me," said the queen, "I've been meaning to bring this up. That is entirely too familiar a tone to take with your queen. My name is Hermione, not Hermy."

"Which brings us to Step Two," said Marnie. "People see the queen and they see privilege, they see wealth, they see high castle walls. You still need to connect with people. A friendly nickname is a good place to start. Makes you seem more human. Besides, it fits in the headlines better. Now, Hermy, it's time to get the message out that all is not 'happily ever after' with you. Get ready for some public sobbing, dear."

Marnie first placed a few teasing tidbits about King Vidor and his transgressions in the popular media. She called several selected town criers and traveling minstrels she knew and carefully leaked some of the more salacious details of the king's behaviour. Then a few days later, after a large crowd had gathered for a public beheading, the queen held a seemingly impromptu yet carefully orchestrated question-and-answer session with the audience. Here, the kingdom learned firsthand of Queen Hermy's heartbreak.

Many a tear fell, and the public's sympathy for her was overwhelming.

After this, the only thing anyone in the kingdom talked about was the queen's marital problems. People everywhere sympathized with her, and could relate to her troubles because of the problems in their own lives. (Of course, there was a silent but sizeable male minority who approved of the king's laddish behavior, but only the most foolhardy would say such a thing out loud.) The queen gave so many interviews and made so many appearances, that she was away from the castle for weeks on end. As time went on, she was besieged by spokespeasants for all sorts of disparate causes, everything from unicorn conservation to jousting leagues for disadvantaged youths. Queen Hermione became a lightning rod that attracted every malcontent and axe-grinder in the kingdom, including the Royal Guild of Malcontented Axe-grinders. Yet despite all the front page attention, photo ops and sympathetic editorials, she was no closer to solving her own problems.

After six months of this aggravation, the queen dismissed Marnie and her team and once again showed up at her sister's portcullis for tea and sympathy. Hepsibah tried to make her feel good about raising public awareness on so many important issues, but Queen Hermione scoffed.

"I may have helped start a few moat safety campaigns," she said, "but my marriage is still a wreck. The king has been totally unmoved by all my public revelations."

"King Vidor is still bounding around like he's a 20 -something prince regent?"

Hepsibah asked.

"Yes. In fact, he has barely any notion of what we've been doing. His advisors screen everything he sees."

"So he's still the same middle-aged egocentric?" asked her sister.

"As vain as a bloody peacock," said Hermione.

Suddenly Hepsibah had a clever idea and brightened into a sly smile. "So does he spend a lot of time in front of a mirror?"

"Heavens yes, he can spend hours gazing at his own image."

"Well, then," smiled Hepsibah, "I have just the thing for him: do you remember that enchanted mirror I used to have?"

Hermione, realizing what her sister was suggesting, began to smile too. "You mean that dreadful one that only tells the truth?"

"That's the one !" Hepsibah smiled triumphantly.

And the two sisters began to laugh and laugh until the servants worried that they had gone mad. The next day King Vidor was anonymously presented with the most beautifully ornate mirror he had ever seen. He was delighted to have such a fine looking-glass with which to greet himself each day. But this charming gift soon began to make his every morning miserable: Not only did the mirror remind the king that he was paunchy, dull-witted and beginning to lose his hair, but it also informed the young women who had been brought to his chambers in no uncertain terms that they were low-rent, castle-wrecking tramps. After a short time of such perceptive reflections, King Vidor came crawling back to the queen begging for her forgiveness. Hermione listened to his sorry tale carefully and said she would think about it, just as soon as she finished work on her searingly honest, tell-all memoirs, over which several publishers were already engaged in a frantic bidding war.

