



Prince
Valiant's
Hal
Foster

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Prince Valiant's Hal Foster

BY CLIVE HOWARD

Here's a man who deliberately spurns a fortune to make his comic strip a true work of art

■ IN THE NEWSPAPER cartoon industry, which now can boast that its 500 assorted strips entertain 70,000,000 people every week, the feature called *Prince Valiant* occupies a position roughly equivalent to that of the Metropolitan Opera Co. in the field of music. Its art work has all the quality of a fine book illustration and has excited even museum connoisseurs.

A book publisher is planning to try something new in the way of cartoon publishing—a stiff-backed, glossy-paper collection of *Prince*



Valiant pages to sell for several dollars more than any other book of cartoons. And a composer is planning to turn *Prince Valiant* into an opera, a distinction that is hardly likely to fall to such features as the *Katzenjammer Kids* and *Popeye the Sailor*. Schools use it as an aid to teaching history.

Yet *Prince Valiant* is not necessarily highbrow. Its portrayal of life in England at the time of King Arthur may be so minute and exact as to inspire the envy of historians. But the story—a combination of high adventure and sly comment on domestic life—is enthralling even to people who have never visited a museum or read a history book.

The cartoon strip, *Prince Val-*



Hal Foster

Foster spends up to 52 hours drawing his Sunday strip—and you can see why from this recent panel which contains approximately 150 separate characters

Valiant, has been described as “a pictorial story of a king’s son, exiled from continental Europe to England in the time of King Arthur.” *Valiant* is, of course, an illustrious member of the Knights of the Round Table, a tried and true comrade of Lancelot, Tristram, Gawain and Galahad. “Drawing his famous ‘singing sword,’” say his syndicators, “he neatly slaughters exactly the right people across the pages of the Sunday papers.”

Prince Valiant is by no means the most widely read cartoon feature. It appears only on Sunday in around 100 newspapers. Its creator, a tall, white-haired artist named Harold R. Foster, is content to remain in an income bracket which would seem like sheer poverty to

the artists who draw features like *Blondie* and *L’il Abner*. Such features, appearing seven days a week, make as much as \$100,000 yearly for their creators. Foster, however, steadfastly resists the urge to make more money. His story and his style of art, he insists, can only be done once a week or else the artistic standards will suffer.

Even done weekly, though, *Valiant* is hugely successful and enjoys a wide and intensely loyal following—probably because all of us at one time or another feel that our 20th Century, for all its comforts and mass-production, is a bit cut-and-dried.

The world in which *Prince Valiant* lives is much less comfortable. It is a world in which men bind up their wounds with strips of cloth, and live at night by the light of sputtering candles. Life in Hal Foster’s recreated days of King Arthur has a beautiful simplicity. Men fight for their honor at the drop of the most casual insult—and with weapons about as uncomplicated as the caveman’s wooden club.

And to *The Brave*, of course, belong *The Fair*. *The Fair*, moreover, possess the type of fragile beauty which began to disappear from the face of the earth the moment *The Fair* began to think it had become a little too dependent on *The Brave*.

To any regular reader of *Prince Valiant*, it will come as no surprise that artist Foster has fallen in love with this world. Since long before he began drawing his strip in 1936, Foster has been a loving student of the King Arthur period. His library is full of old fiction, history

and scholarly tomes on heraldry. He reads a great deal, carefully cultivating the old idiom and watching for the flash of inspiration that will create a new adventure or a new romance.

The stories in *Prince Valiant* are told in beautiful and painstaking drawings and in a prose style which has a grace and elegance unlike any other strip. In one recent adventure *Prince Valiant* was sent as a spy to the court of villainous old King Tourien, a robber baron of fearful strength. He found himself alone among enemies inside the castle, dining with King Tourien and the king’s three husky and barbaric sons.

The dining hall was dark and forbidding. At the head of the table greedy King Tourien’s straggly chin whiskers quivered at the prospect of food. Along the sides, the three sons watched Valiant with cold and suspicious eyes.

Servants brought in great platters of nearly raw meat and huge tankards of ale. Valiant tried to eat with the gluttonous manners of his hosts—tearing at the meat with his fingers and teeth, letting big morsels drop to the cluttered table and to the dogs who roamed over the floor.

Valiant knew he was facing a severe test. Under the circumstances, a comic strip hero like Steve Canyon might have said, “Got to keep my wits now.” A *Li’il Abner* would have said, “As any fool can plainly see, I better get out . . . I can see it!” Or a *Moon Mullins* might have said, “I gotta



take it easy wit dese bums.”

Artist Foster’s idiom is quite different. He had *Prince Valiant* say—in the old English of the Round Table—“May fortune grant me a glib tongue this night!”

Prince Valiant passed his test. Even as the tankards of ale piled up on the table, he kept his “glib tongue.” His hosts fell into a drunken stupor without once tricking him into betraying himself.

As Foster’s old-fashioned prose described the scene: “The smoky torches burn out and one by one the candles sputter and die. Only the heavy tread of the sentries breaks the stillness. In this dread fortress dwells a small, mad king with mad ambitions. His murderous career must be ended, but how? A thousand knights could not take this impregnable castle!”

On subsequent Sundays, of course, King Tourien’s “murderous career” was indeed ended, thanks to Valiant’s quick thinking and physical strength. The adventure over, Valiant returned to his wife, the fair and blond Princess Aleta. And thus began one of the between-adventure interludes which to many readers are the chief delight of the strip.

The Prince (perhaps like all men everywhere, in whatever period of history) is brave and resourceful in the world of men, but somewhat baffled by the ways of women. And Princess Aleta (perhaps like all men’s dreams of the perfect woman) is seemingly frail and helpless, yet fully competent of getting

her own way around men.

Theirs is the kind of love affair which has perhaps become impossible in the modern world of "equal rights." To Valiant, Aleta is beautiful, breathtaking, mysterious and in constant need of the protection a strong man affords. To Aleta, Valiant is brave, strong, handsome—and yet a little stupid, awkward and in constant need of a woman's helping and guiding hand.

As a lover, Valiant is perhaps no better than the average man—he is rough, tongue-tied and all a-tremble. Yet his Aleta could hardly care for him more. When he embraced her at his home-coming after the King Tourien adventure, artist Foster described her emotions in these words: "Aleta, her ribs cracking, squeezed against rough armor, uncomfortable as a piece of cheese against a grater, was content."



This is the world of King Arthur, of Prince Valiant—and of artist Foster. It is a world that holds readers of the strip enchanted—but none more fascinated than Foster himself.

"The more I learn about King Arthur's days," he has said, "the less I think of our modern civilization. True, life was often cruel in those days—but it was an honest brutality. At least they didn't justify it with a lot of virtuous platitudes, as we often do."

It is Foster's special loving care that keeps *Prince Valiant* so charming to its followers. On weekday mornings, Foster can usually be found in the studio of his Connecticut home about nine o'clock. At

the start he usually swings his chair around to face the window, places his feet on the sill and stares out into the woodland scenery—across a little trout stream and to the top of a hill above.

Somehow this puts him in the mood for his work; his mind starts projecting back to King Arthur's times. Perhaps he will read a history book for awhile, or an old novel. And then the scenes and the phrases start coming to him—Valiant and Aleta, and all their friends and enemies, start moving through the woodlands of the Connecticut landscape.

His ideas go into a big looseleaf notebook, written in pencil in his almost illegible script. He works them out in full detail, describing the scenes and writing the dialogue. His composition is a labor of love and comes almost effortlessly

—he already has a fairly detailed notion of what will happen all the rest of Valiant's life.

Prince Valiant grew up in the strip, and will grow old in the strip—at the rate of about two or three years for every one of a reader's years. He entered the cartoon world at the age of six—when his father King Aguar, his throne in the mythical kingdom of Thule usurped by outlaws, fled to the shores of England. While still in his teens, the young Prince started out on the series of adventures which saw him eventually accepted as a Knight at King Arthur's Round Table. Foster had him take over the throne by the simple device of leading an invasion against Thule and putting Val's

father on the throne once more.

Foster figures the Prince's present age at around 21 or 22. He met the Princess Aleta when he was 19. Foster, who strongly disapproves of the cartoon strip heroines who follow the heroes all over the world—unchaperoned and unmarried—married the two off a few months after they had met. In a little less than two years—Prince Valiant time—the Prince's heir was born. "In my strip," Foster says, in a tone of voice that usually goes with a fist pounding the table, "if it is time for a woman to have a baby—she has a baby."

Tiny Prince Arn, however, now matures at the rate of only one day a week. But there will come a time when young Prince Arn will grow up, and Prince Valiant will grow old, a lot faster. "After all," Foster explains, "even at his present slow rate of aging, there will come a time when Prince Valiant is going to be a little too old to go out into the field and joust with a lady's garter tied to his sleeve."

At the drawing board Foster applies the same affectionate care, and it takes him about 52 painstaking hours a week to produce his strip.

To most artists, a comic strip is an almost sure road to an ulcer; the pressure to get new ideas and meet deadlines is almost unbearable. The author of a humor strip like *Moon Mullins* must constantly worry about running dry of new "gags." The adventure strip



like *Steve Canyon* must be geared closely to international events. The *Buck Rogers* type of scientific adventure has to move mighty fast these days to keep ahead of real laboratory developments.

Foster is probably the happiest of all cartoonists alive. Today's events may change, fads in humor may come and go and the scientists may invent things that make an adventure artist's wildest dreams seem mild by comparison—but King Arthur's court is permanent and immutable.

Since ideas come easily to him, Foster could add a daily strip to his Sunday drawings simply by putting in more hours at the drawing board. Or he could hire assistants, as many comic strip artists do. Easiest of all, he could simply stop putting so much time-consuming detail into his drawings.

From time to time, people have suggested to Foster that he follow one of these courses and thus move into the delightful luxury of the \$100,000-a-year bracket. He has only scorn for such advice, expressing his distaste for material wealth with the comment, "Monkeys and bluejays also accumulate bright objects."

Even as a boy Foster thought—as did the knights of old—that happiness is more important than wealth. He was born in Nova Scotia, of an English-Prussian-Irish family which had seen better days, and had to go to work right after grammar school.

His start in the world of art was at the very bottom of the ladder. He was hired to draw sketches of women's underwear—the kind with numerous buttons and lace around

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the knees—for the mail order catalogue of the Hudson Bay Company.

By the time he was almost 30, he found himself stuck in a job with no future and with the necessity of supporting a wife and two sons. Gambling everything, he sold all his family possessions and moved to Chicago. There he got a job in an engraving plant and began taking art lessons.

In 1933, when he was earning his living at an agency of free-lance artists who did advertising illustrations, he was asked to draw the Sunday page of the cartoon strip *Tarzan and the Apes*. He was a little contemptuous of the cartoon world and put in as little time as possible on the first few strips.

Strangely, fan letters started pouring in immediately. Newspaper readers liked Foster's style even if he wasn't trying his best. The letters changed his whole outlook.

He began working seriously on the strip and soon it was recognized as the best drawing job in the busi-

ness. After three years he was ready to strike out on his own—and King Features gave him a chance to try *Prince Valiant* on the public.

Foster has never regretted his decision to abandon serious painting for the comic strip field.

Recently, when he was lecturing before a woman's club in New Jersey, one of the members rose to complain about the bad influence of comic strips on children. She exempted the work of Foster, of course—his strip has been approved by so many educators as to be above suspicion—but asked him if the rest of the industry didn't need a house-cleaning.

Presumably she expected to find strong support from the scholarly and mild-mannered Mr. Foster. Instead he told her, "Let's say the average youngster spends a half hour a day on the comics. If that half hour can undo the good that parents are supposed to do in the other 23½ hours, madam, whose fault would you say that was?" ■ ■

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