

ROYAL SOUVENIR

THEY ARE THE COUPLE WITH THE COMMON TOUCH, WRITES

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She seemed puzzled by the very words about to spill out of her mouth.

It was as if the impending phrase contradicted her mindset, or the realities of her circumstances.

"I nearly said it makes it all worthwhile."

Fiona Hillan wasn't merely being star-struck.

She had just shaken the hands of a gentle prince and his glowing wife, but it wasn't as if the occasion had caused a bout of irrationality.

She was simply overwhelmed with thankfulness – appreciative of the fact the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge had stepped into their tiny blackened neighbourhood, a town whose name is beginning to drop out of the consciousness of most Australians, a Blue Mountains hamlet six months ago besieged by a heat so intense it shocked veteran firefighters to their fire-hardened cores.

To say hello, to offer warm words of sympathy, to stop and listen to their unfiltered stories of grief, told in a rudimentary tin shed in Winmalee.

Fiona and Murray Hillan's home was erased from the map on October 17, 2013, caught up in a hellish firestorm that incinerated 212 homes in 36

minutes. In the aftermath, the pair walked down Winmalee's Singles Ridge Rd at 10pm, stumbling in the dark, not knowing what they were going to find on their bush block.

They found the remnants of a home, still glowing.

So how does a woman, beaten down by horrendous circumstances, reason that a visit from the young royals almost makes it worthwhile?

"It is wonderful. I nearly said it almost makes it worthwhile, but it doesn't really. It doesn't replace everything that we've lost but it certainly helps the healing process," she says.

"The support we've had all the way along has been amazing. This is the cherry on the top."

She pauses to compose herself and then explains why this moment makes a difference.

They cared. They "showed compassion", they had "amazing eye contact and were very

engaged – genuinely interested".

This is what we've always wanted to know. It has long been the debated issue at dinner parties, around the water cooler.

Are they real? They look genuine enough.

Their lives have been seemingly stripped back to give the appearance of normality.

But do Prince William and his

bride Kate genuinely have the human touch – an ingrained passion for the people that appears foreign to Will's grandfather Prince Philip and, to a lesser extent, his father Charles?

What is the conversation that occurs in the No.1 car when it pulls into a gravel car park of a Girl Guides hall in the mountains behind Sydney, knowing the pair have an hour of handshakes and awkward small talk with strangers who will watch their every move?

Are there deep sighs, or is their tone marked with compassion and eagerness?

It is a probing, insoluble thought that if one day answered with a strain of negativity, Australia's attachment with royalty may be mortally wounded, considering Prince William and his gorgeous wife are deemed by many to be the saviours of constitutional monarchy in this independent-thinking nation.

He is their last chance – almost – the worst enemy of a rabid Aussie republican.

One can only judge what is seen and heard.

In that simple case it appears the adoration the public have in this loved-up royal couple is wondrously justified.

At this informal sausage sandwich lunch with the heroes and heroines of the Blue

Mountains rural fire fighting army at the Winmalee Guides Hall, the royal pair divides – and conquers.

Will flanks down the right-hand side of the hall to meet the uniformed folk. He is warm in his approach and engaging, asking the right questions and waiting for every word of the response, locking eyes and gently touching shoulders with his royal hands.

His eyes are only interrupted when searching the crowd for his wife, who is making her way down the right flank, sharing convivial conversation with

gruff, beer-bellied men with unkempt bird-nest beards and women who probably care little for pomp and grace. Their worlds may be polar opposites, but they come together.

"That must have been horrific," Kate responds to a story of escape.

Will is free to laugh, throwing his balding head back with each roar, frequently teasing his own short-comings, appearing uneasy with the spotlight.

Just a bloke.

"I'm a terrible bowler, they always bounce up here," he says, with his hands at shoulder height.

"I'm sure you'd kick my bum,"

an RFS volunteer says. "Oh I doubt that very much. Maybe in a game of rugby."

He keeps his mind hidden and remains approachable, although retains some mystery by not being overly expressive with waiting crowds, or rushing over to greet the masses crammed in and yelling his name.

Some may be put out by that. But there is no rock star here – more a man trying to overcome insecurities and inherent shyness.

Walking pensively down Winmalee's Buena Vista Rd where 43 homes were torched six months to the day, the royal couple appears deeply moved.

They tear up the morning's schedule after meeting two aggrieved families in the process of rebuilding their lives.

They must meet more.

Again they split.

The duchess takes off, marching down the next charred block in her vibrant blue and white Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress and blue wedges, to say hi to Eartha Odell, who lives at No.21.

"They were very sincere in trying to understand our grief and very kind and warm and approachable to the children," Eartha says.

They gathered bouquets of flowers and children's books for baby George, including one from Jesse Nicholls, 10, by author Jackie French about bushfires.

"She told me George will like that very much," Jesse says.

Four young girls dressed as elegant princesses drew the Duchess's eye.

She strolled over, accepted some hand-picked flowers from their own garden, and asked them who they were dressed as.

The answer was as expected – you, your Royal Highness.

Imitation is, after all, the highest form of flattery.

Who doesn't want to be a duchess. Or a duke.

Especially ones that care.



The Duchess of Cambridge, greets well-wishers following a reception at the Sydney Opera House. Picture: AFP.



Prince William notices Prince George's name on the Australian baggy green cap presented by Glenn McGrath as he attends a reception at the Opera House. Picture: Getty.



The Duchess shakes hands with members of the public as she leaves Manly. Picture: Toby Zerna.



The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge with the Winmalee Girls Guides in the Blue Mountains. Picture: Bradley Hunter.



The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge observe abseiling and team building exercises at Narrow Neck Lookout in the Blue Mountains. Picture: AFP.



Prince William watches as his wife, Kate, pats a ram during a tour of the sheep and wool exhibit at the Royal Easter Show. Picture: AP.



Kate, Duchess of Cambridge, meets a young fan on her visit to the Royal Easter Show. Picture: Craig Wilson.



Two princes after touchdown. Picture: Adam Taylor.



A clearly moved Duke of Cambridge speaks with patients of Bear Cottage in Sydney. Picture: Getty Images.



William takes the starter's pistol to kick off a surf lifesaving event. Picture: Toby Zerna.



The crowd-pleasing duchess shakes hands with well-wishers as she leaves Manly. Picture: Toby Zerna.



Mmmm ... sweet, sweet chocolate. Prince William is presented with an Easter egg at the show.



Happy to chat, the Duchess makes yet another youngster's day during their sun-drenched tour of the Royal Easter Show. Picture: AP.



Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Kate at Manly to watch the nippers strut their stuff. Picture: Bradley Hunter.

