





*A Riveting Romance*

# *The Belle and the Duke*

By Alton C. Byers

*A little more than a century ago, a captivating love story unfolded in the mountain town of Elkins, West Virginia. The lovers were so glamorous and intriguing, their romance captured peoples' attention around the globe. Here is the little-known story of the lovely Katherine "Kitty" Elkins and her beloved Duke of the Abruzzi.*



**World-famous Italian photographer Vittorio Sella** accompanied the Duke of the Abruzzi on most of his expeditions. He captured this breathtaking panorama of Baltoro Glacier with Mitre Peak, Mustagh Tower, and K2 in 1909, during the Duke's K2 expedition in Pakistan.

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**A**t the turn of the twentieth century, the world's most celebrated explorer was Luigi Amedeo di Savoia-Aosta, grandson of the first king of Italy. Better known as the Duke of the Abruzzi, he was a real-life Indiana Jones.

The Duke was born in 1873, and at age six entered military school. Before he was 20 he had climbed the Matterhorn, and at 21 had commanded a naval vessel. At age 24, he organized an expedition and made the first ascent of Mount St. Elias in Alaska, North America's second-highest mountain. In 1900, at age 27, he came closer to reaching the North Pole than any explorer ever had.

In 1906, the Duke was the first to summit many of the glacier-clad Ruwenzori Mountains of Uganda, called the "Mountains of the Moon." Three years later, his expedition to K2 in Pakistan (known as the "Savage Mountain" because of its high fatality rate among mountaineers) set a new high-altitude record. At K2 he also pioneered a new route, the "Abruzzi Spur," which was used by the Italian team that finally conquered the mountain 45 years later.

Each of the Duke's expeditions included scientific com-

ponents that added immensely to the world's understanding of the botany, geology, and glaciology of the mountain ranges he explored. Interestingly, the world-famous Italian photographer Vittorio Sella accompanied the Duke on most of his trips, capturing stunning black-and-white images of glaciers and mountain landscapes that remain unmatched to this day.

In addition to his climbing exploits, the Duke enjoyed a distinguished naval career and was a sought-after speaker at international exploration and diplomatic gatherings. He was also a skilled big-game hunter, sports car racer, and yachtsman.

He was "one of those gifted people blessed with every attribute," mountaineer and writer Ian Cameron once said of the Duke. Indeed, American and northern European newspapers lamented that they could boast no similar heroes among their own nationalities.

### **"The Belle of America"**

Yet as dashing and intrepid as the young Duke was, he was soon to meet his match in the beautiful and accomplished Katherine Elkins. Long limbed, red haired, fiercely independent, and sometimes impulsive, 20-year-old Katherine stood out in any crowd, from the rural lanes of Elkins to the high-society balls of Washington, D.C.



Katherine was the daughter of Stephen Benton Elkins and the granddaughter of Henry Gassaway Davis, both of whom represented West Virginia in the U.S. Senate. Elkins and Davis were timber and coal barons who together founded the town of Elkins in 1890. Their beautiful mansions, Halliehurst and Graceland, now belong to their namesake college, Davis and Elkins, in Elkins.

Katherine Elkins grew up mostly in Elkins at the Halliehurst mansion with her mother and four brothers. With her father serving in Congress and also as Secretary of War in the Harrison administration, she also spent time in the family's home on K Street in Washington. Her close friends included Alice Roosevelt (daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt); journalist and newspaper publisher Cissy Patterson; and the Countess Marguerite Cassini, adopted daughter of the Russian ambassador. Katherine was well educated, energetic, and skilled in the social graces. She was also a passionate rider and horse breeder. Called "The Belle of America," she was courted by some of the richest and most eligible young bachelors of the day.

No one knows for sure where Katherine and the Duke first met. Some say it was at Lake Como in Italy. The Duke often went there to rest after his expeditions, and the Elkins

family visited there annually to purchase art and other home furnishings for Halliehurst. Others say it was at a social function in Washington. Still others say they met in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1907, during the town's 300th anniversary celebrations. Regardless of where they met, by all accounts it was love at first sight. From that point on, the two were constantly in each other's company and frequently seen together at Washington military and social functions.

### **A Fairytale Romance**

Katherine's romance with the Duke quickly turned into the fairytale love story of the new century. Newspapers began ignoring the Duke's expeditions in favor of any bit of information about his new relationship. With their blossoming love affair now the center of global attention, the couple found that their privacy was a thing of the past. Reporters waited anxiously at the Elkins post office, hoping for an interview with Katherine, who rode her horse there daily to collect the family mail. Hounded by reporters at train stations, hotels, and restaurants, the Duke began traveling under assumed names. Whereas earlier he had roamed the streets of Paris, Rome, and New York freely, he said he now felt as if he were "in prison." The Italian royal family was also upset by the sudden international attention.

To avoid the press, the couple began to rendezvous secretly, initially in Palm Springs, Florida. Taking a leisurely drive back to Washington, accompanied by Katherine's mother, the couple was met upon their return by a large group of European and American reporters, who interpreted the "tryst" as proof that an engagement and wedding were forthcoming. Front page headlines proclaimed that it was just a matter of time before the Duke's marriage to Katherine was approved by the royal family and officially announced.

In those days, royalty married for political, social, or financial gain. Love was hardly a consideration. And while Katherine was a member of the American aristocracy, in the eyes of the Italian royal family, she was a commoner. In order for her to marry the Duke, special permission had to be obtained from the Duke's cousin, King Vittorio Emanuele III.

The Duke approached his family for permission to marry Katherine, but no matter how hard he pleaded, King Vittorio would not agree. Month after month the Duke lobbied the king but his consent was denied. The Duke made the case that other commoners had been allowed to marry into the family, and that at nearly age 35, he needed a wife. But the king was unmoved. Meanwhile, the Duke's letters and gifts to Katherine continued to arrive in Elkins, and Katherine was seen admiring wedding gowns in Washington. Still, no formal proposal of marriage was extended.

### **An Angry Father**

Stephen Elkins became impatient and said publicly that he doubted the Duke had the strength of character to stand up

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to his family and marry his daughter. Meanwhile, newspapers reported erroneously that the Duke was “making progress,” slowly but surely convincing his cousin to give his blessing to the marriage.

As time went on, everyone began to behave badly. Stephen Elkins grew increasingly vocal in his criticisms of the Duke. It was also reported that the Duke fought with one of his older brothers, who opposed the marriage.

When Stephen Elkins ordered the Elkins postmaster to intercept Katherine’s letters and packages from the Duke, the press accused him of attempting to destroy the relationship. Finally, in the fall of 1909, the Duke departed in secret for his climbing expedition in Pakistan, surely demoralized by the stubbornness of the royal family, the rancor of Stephen Elkins, and the relentless hounding of the press.

After the Duke returned from Pakistan later that year, he continued to see Katherine. In fact, the romance lasted four more years, during which time the Duke further pleaded with his family for consent to marry her.

When Stephen Elkins died in 1911, many Paris newspapers predicted the couple would surely marry soon, since, they speculated, Elkins was the main one objecting to the marriage. Yet two years later, there was still no approval from the Italian royal family.

### A Love Lost

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The Duke reportedly urged Katherine to marry her childhood sweetheart, Billy Hitt. Hitt was the son of Illinois Congressman Robert Roberts Hitt and himself a wealthy D.C. socialite, who had been Katherine’s suitor before she met the Duke. He remained loyal to her throughout her courtship with the Duke, and was quoted thus by the San Francisco *Call*: “Seven years will I serve for you, Duke or no Duke, and then it will be for you to say yes or no.”

In 1913, seven years after she first met the Duke, Katherine married Billy Hitt. According to the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, she gave her family only a couple hours notice of the

wedding. It was rumored she wore no bridal gown or veil.

The marriage lasted eight years and the couple divorced in Paris in 1921. (It was said that Katherine kept dozens of photographs of the Duke on her bedroom walls.) However, the couple remarried at Halliehurst in 1923.

At about the same time, the Duke, now in his 50s, began to focus his still-considerable energies on the establishment of a model agricultural farm in Somaliland, then a colony of Italy. The Duke had loved this African country with a passion since first visiting it as a young naval officer during a rebellion in 1893. The area of Somaliland that was to eventually become the Duke of the Abruzzi Village was located about 80 miles northeast of Mogadishu. From all accounts, Abruzzi Village was one of the most successful sustainable agricultural projects ever launched in Africa.

### A Love Endures

Though by this time it would seem that the fieriest love affair of the twentieth century was long over, it was not. Years later it was discovered that Katherine, then the millionaire heiress to the Elkins fortune, had financed many of the Duke’s projects in Abruzzi Village, sending funds to purchase machinery, hospital supplies, and road- and railroad-building equipment.

The Duke’s final expedition took place in 1928, during which he searched for the source of the Web-Sebelle River, which provided water for Abruzzi Village. While looking for a suitable campsite one afternoon, he discovered he had lost a ring Katherine had given him. According to a startled young assistant, Lieutenant Braca, who was assigned to the expedition, the loss of the ring devastated the Duke. Shaking with anger, he proclaimed he would have given everything—his title, career, and life of adventure—to have married Katherine, the only woman he had ever loved. But, he lamented, he was not independently wealthy and would never allow himself to become a kept man.

When the Duke died of cancer at age 60 in 1933, his home was found filled with photographs of Katherine Elkins. Katherine wore an emerald ring given to her by the Duke and a medallion containing a lock of his hair for the rest of her life.

Katherine Elkins died in 1936 at age 50. The Philadelphia *Inquirer* noted that she “kept throughout a half century of

