

**LETTERS FROM GEORGE
ELIOT TO ELMA
STUART, 1872-1880**

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Letters from George Eliot to Elma Stuart, 1872-1880 by George Eliot

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GEORGE ELIOT

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TO

ELMA STUART



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FROM
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TO
ELMA STUART
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EDITED BY
ROLAND STUART



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INTRODUCTION

ELMA STUART was the youngest daughter of William James Fraser of Ladhope by his wife May Anne Cumming of Logie, and was born about 1837.

I have often heard my mother say it was the misfortune of their lives that their father died while she and her brother and sisters were still quite young: from all accounts he was a man of fine character, devoted to his children, and absorbed in their welfare. Soon after her husband's death his widow married again, and the children were allowed to grow up much as they pleased. My mother, who was of an affectionate and loving disposition, was not understood by her parents, and her childhood was far from being a happy one.

viii GEORGE ELIOT LETTERS

In the year 1860 my mother married an officer in the Black Watch, and my father dying shortly after, she was left with a small pittance on which to live and educate her son. Hitherto my mother had had but little happiness in her life, and it will therefore be the more readily understood, when, in later years she met with the tender love and deep understanding sympathy which she found in George Eliot and her writings, how the long pent-up stream of her affection overflowed its banks, carrying all before it to the feet of her "Spiritual Mother."

It was about 1870 that my mother, who then lived in Brittany, fell in with the writings of George Eliot, which made such a deep impression upon her that she determined to make something with her own hands to present to George Eliot as a token of gratitude for the solace and comfort her writings had been to her.

The terrible struggle between France and Prussia was just at its height, and some of the wood-carvers from Paris came to our out-of-the-way corner of Brittany, seeking a

place in which to carry on their art free from molestation. It was their presence at Dinan and the sight of their work which suggested to my mother the idea of taking up that branch of art. She threw herself into the work with such ardour that it was not long before she distanced her masters not only in designs but also in execution—and they, growing jealous of her refused to give her more lessons, and threw annoying difficulties in her way. This only made my mother the more determined to succeed. Accordingly, as soon as the siege of Paris was ended, accompanied by a devoted friend, she made her way thither and took a tiny apartment in the Quartier Montmartre. There she entered an atelier, under one of the best masters, sometimes working as many as sixteen hours a day.

There is no need to recount the many privations endured in Paris—were they not all borne for the sake of making something worthy of George Eliot, and as a convincing proof of her appreciation and gratitude for her writings?

x GEORGE ELIOT LETTERS

My mother excelled in her art, and it is amazing the amount of work she accomplished in the ten years before a long and terrible illness overtook her. She sent me to the best schools she could afford, the yearly bills being paid by the labour of her clever hands.

Unfortunately, copies only remain of my mother's first two letters to George Eliot; but these, and George Eliot's subsequent letters, explain, how what began as a sense of gratitude on my mother's part, developed into a mutual love such as exists between parent and child, and which was only terminated by death. My mother always treasured these letters as her most sacred possession, and in all her wanderings in search of health they never left her.

Having thus briefly sketched the origin of this friendship, I leave the letters to speak for themselves, only adding an explanatory note here and there where the context seemed to need it.

With regard to the letters themselves I have felt, after much consideration, that I