

‘I feel I must speak to you once more as sincerely as I have already spoke,’ she said. ‘I shall leave aside all the discretion and reticence I ought to show in a first conversation with you; but I implore you to listen to me without interrupting.’

‘It seems to me that your attachment to me deserves at least this meagre reward, that I should not hide from you any of my feelings and that I should show them to you as they are. This will no doubt be the only time in my life when I shall give myself the liberty of revealing them to you, yet I must confess to my shame that what I fear is the certainty that one day the love you feel for me now will die. That certainty seems to me so dreadful that, even if the reasons imposed by my duty were not insurmountable, I doubt whether I could bring myself to face such unhappiness. I know that you are free, that I am free also, and that, in all the circumstances, the world would perhaps have no reason to blame either of us if we were to bind ourselves together for life. But how long does men’s passion last when the bond is eternal? Can I expect a miracle in my favour? If not, can I resign myself to the prospect that a passion in which my happiness depended must infallibly come to an end? M. de Clèves was perhaps the only man in the world capable of remaining in love with the woman he had married. I was fated not to be able to take advantage of my good fortune; perhaps, too, his passion only endured because he found no answering passion in me. But I should not be able to keep your alive in this way: it seems to me, indeed, that your constancy has been sustained by the obstacles it has encountered. There were enough of them to arouse in you the desire for victory, while my involuntary actions, together with what you discovered by chance, gave you enough hope not to be deterred.’

‘Ah! Madame,’ exclaimed M. de Nemours, ‘I can no longer keep the silence you imposed on me. Your words are too unjust and you make it too plain how far you are from being predisposed in my favour.’

‘I confess,’ she replied, ‘that my passions may govern me, but they cannot blind me. Nothing can prevent me from recognizing that you were born with a great susceptibility to love and all the qualities required for success in love. You have already had a number of passionate attachments; you would have others. I should no longer be able to make you happy; I should see you behaving towards another woman as you had behaved towards me. I should be mortally wounded at the sight and I cannot even be sure I should not suffer the miseries of jealousy. I have already said too much to be able to hide from you now that you once made me feel those cruel sufferings. It was the evening the Queen gave me Mme de Thémynes’s letter, the one they said was addressed to you: what I felt then has remained with me, convincing me that it is the greatest of all evils.’

‘There is not a woman who does not wish, whether through vanity or true inclination, to have you at her feet. There are very few who do not like you; my experience tells me that there are  
36 none who would not like you if you wanted them to. I should always believe you to be in love, and  
loved in return, and I should not often be mistaken. Yet in that predicament, I should have no  
other choice but to suffer: I cannot tell if I should even dare complain. A woman may reproach a  
39 lover, but can she reproach a husband who has merely stopped loving her? Even if I could  
accustom myself to misery of that sort, there is another to which I could never become inured: I  
should always hear M. de Clèves accusing you of his death, reproaching me for loving you and  
42 marrying you, and reminding me of the difference between his devotion and yours. It is impossible  
to set aside such powerful reasons: I must remain in my present state and stand by the resolution I  
have taken never to abandon it.’

Madame de Lafayette, *The Princesse de Clèves*, ed. and tr. Terence Cave (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 148–50.