

# Chitra, a Play in One Act

Rabindranath Tagore

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Rabindranath Tagore



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One Act**

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PLAY IN ONE ACT \*\*\*

# **CHITRA**

**A PLAY IN ONE ACT**

**BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE**

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**TO**

**MRS. WILLIAM VAUGHN MOODY**

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## PREFACE

THIS lyrical drama was written about twenty-five years ago. It is based on the following story from the Mahabharata.

In the course of his wanderings, in fulfilment of a vow of penance, Arjuna came to Manipur. There he saw Chitrangada, the beautiful daughter of Chitravahana, the king of the country. Smitten with her charms, he asked the king for the hand of his daughter in marriage. Chitravahana asked him who he was, and learning that he was Arjuna the Pandara, told him that Prabhanjana, one of his ancestors in the kingly line of Manipur, had long been childless. In order to obtain an heir, he performed severe penances. Pleased with these austerities, the god Shiva gave him this boon, that he and his successors should each have one child. It so happened that the promised child had invariably been a son. He, Chitravahana, was the first to have only a daughter Chitrangada to perpetuate the race. He had, therefore, always treated her as a son and had made her his heir.

Continuing, the king said:

"The one son that will be born to her must be the perpetuator of my race. That son will be the price that I shall demand for this marriage. You can take her, if you like, on this condition."

Arjuna promised and took Chitrangada to wife, and lived in her father's capital for three years. When a son was born to them, he embraced her with affection, and taking leave of her and her father, set out again on his travels.

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# CHITRA

# THE CHARACTERS

## GODS:

MADANA (*Eros*).

VASANTA (*Lycoris*).

## MORTALS:

CHITRA, daughter of the King of Manipur.

ARJUNA, a prince of the house of the Kurus. He is of the Kshatriya or "warrior caste," and during the action is living as a Hermit retired in the forest.

VILLAGERS from an outlying district of Manipur.

NOTE.—The dramatic poem "Chitra" has been performed in India without scenery—the actors being surrounded by the audience. Proposals for its production here having been made to him, he went through this translation and provided stage directions, but wished these omitted if it were printed as a book.

# SCENE I

*Chitra*

*ART thou the god with the five darts, the Lord of Love?*

*Madana*

*I am he who was the first born in the heart of the  
Creator. I  
bind in bonds of pain and bliss the lives of men and  
women!*

*Chitra*

*I know, I know what that pain is and those bonds.—And who  
art  
thou, my lord?*

*Vasanta*

*I am his friend—Vasanta—the King of the Seasons. Death  
and  
decrepitude would wear the world to the bone but that I  
follow  
them and constantly attack them. I am Eternal Youth.*

*Chitra*

*I bow to thee, Lord Vasanta.*

*Madana*

*But what stern vow is thine, fair stranger? Why dost thou  
wither*

thy fresh youth with penance and mortification? Such a  
sacrifice  
is not fit for the worship of love. Who art thou and what  
is thy  
prayer?

Chitra

I am Chitra, the daughter of the kingly house of Manipur.  
With  
godlike grace Lord Shiva promised to my royal grandsire an  
unbroken line of male descent. Nevertheless, the divine  
word  
proved powerless to change the spark of life in my  
mother's womb  
—so invincible was my nature, woman though I be.

Madana

I know, that is why thy father brings thee up as his son.  
He has  
taught thee the use of the bow and all the duties of a  
king.

Chitra

Yes, that is why I am dressed in man's attire and have  
left the  
seclusion of a woman's chamber. I know no feminine wiles  
for  
winning hearts. My hands are strong to bend the bow, but  
I have  
never learnt Cupid's archery, the play of eyes.

Madana

That requires no schooling, fair one. The eye does its  
work  
untaught, and he knows how well, who is struck in the  
heart.

## Chitra

One day in search of game I roved alone to the forest on  
the bank  
of the Purna river. Tying my horse to a tree trunk I  
entered a  
dense thicket on the track of a deer. I found a narrow  
sinuous  
path meandering through the dusk of the entangled boughs,  
the  
foliage vibrated with the chirping of crickets, when of a  
sudden  
I came upon a man lying on a bed of dried leaves, across  
my path.  
I asked him haughtily to move aside, but he heeded not.  
Then  
with the sharp end of my bow I pricked him in contempt.  
Instantly he leapt up with straight, tall limbs, like a  
sudden  
tongue of fire from a heap of ashes. An amused smile  
flickered  
round the corners of his mouth, perhaps at the sight of my  
boyish  
countenance. Then for the first time in my life I felt  
myself a  
woman, and knew that a man was before me.

## Madana

At the auspicious hour I teach the man and the woman this  
supreme  
lesson to know themselves. What happened after that?

## Chitra

With fear and wonder I asked him "Who are you?" "I am  
Arjuna," he  
said, "of the great Kuru clan." I stood petrified like a  
statue,  
and forgot to do him obeisance. Was this indeed Arjuna,  
the one  
great idol of my dreams! Yes, I had long ago heard how he

had

vowed a twelve-years' celibacy. Many a day my young  
ambition had

spurred me on to break my lance with him, to challenge him  
in

disguise to single combat, and prove my skill in arms  
against

him. Ah, foolish heart, whither fled thy presumption?  
Could I

but exchange my youth with all its aspirations for the  
clod of

earth under his feet, I should deem it a most precious  
grace. I

know not in what whirlpool of thought I was lost, when  
suddenly I

saw him vanish through the trees. O foolish woman,  
neither didst

thou greet him, nor speak a word, nor beg forgiveness, but  
stoodest like a barbarian boor while he contemptuously  
walked

away! . . . Next morning I laid aside my man's clothing.  
I

donned bracelets, anklets, waist-chain, and a gown of  
purple red

silk. The unaccustomed dress clung about my shrinking  
shame; but

I hastened on my quest, and found Arjuna in the forest  
temple of

Shiva.

Madana

Tell me the story to the end. I am the heart-born god,  
and I

understand the mystery of these impulses.

Chitra

Only vaguely can I remember what things I said, and what  
answer I

got. Do not ask me to tell you all. Shame fell on me  
like a

thunderbolt, yet could not break me to pieces, so utterly

hard,  
so like a man am I. His last words as I walked home  
pricked my  
ears like red hot needles. "I have taken the vow of  
celibacy. I  
am not fit to be thy husband!" Oh, the vow of a man!  
Surely  
thou knowest, thou god of love, that unnumbered saints and  
sages  
have surrendered the merits of their life-long penance at  
the  
feet of a woman. I broke my bow in two and burnt my  
arrows in  
the fire. I hated my strong, lithe arm, scored by drawing  
the  
bowstring. O Love, god Love, thou hast laid low in the  
dust the  
vain pride of my manlike strength; and all my man's  
training lies  
crushed under thy feet. Now teach me thy lessons; give me  
the  
power of the weak and the weapon of the unarmed hand.

Madana

I will be thy friend. I will bring the world-conquering  
Arjuna a  
captive before thee, to accept his rebellion's sentence at  
thy  
hand.

Chitra

Had I but the time needed, I could win his heart by slow  
degrees,  
and ask no help of the gods. I would stand by his side as  
a  
comrade, drive the fierce horses of his war-chariot,  
attend him  
in the pleasures of the chase, keep guard at night at the  
entrance of his tent, and help him in all the great duties  
of a  
Kshatriya, rescuing the weak, and meting out justice where

it is

due. Surely at last the day would have come for him to  
look at

me and wonder, "What boy is this? Has one of my slaves in  
a

former life followed me like my good deeds into this?" I  
am not

the woman who nourishes her despair in lonely silence,  
feeding it

with nightly tears and covering it with the daily patient  
smile,

a widow from her birth. The flower of my desire shall  
never drop

into the dust before it has ripened to fruit. But it is  
the

labour of a life time to make one's true self known and  
honoured.

Therefore I have come to thy door, thou world-vanquishing  
Love,

and thou, Vasanta, youthful Lord of the Seasons, take from  
my young body this primal injustice, an unattractive  
plainness.

For a single day make me superbly beautiful, even as  
beautiful as

was the sudden blooming of love in my heart. Give me but  
one

brief day of perfect beauty, and I will answer for the  
days that  
follow.

Madana

Lady, I grant thy prayer.

Vasanta

Not for the short span of a day, but for one whole year  
the charm

of spring blossoms shall nestle round thy limbs.



## SCENE II

Arjuna

WAS I dreaming or was what I saw by the lake truly there?  
Sitting on the mossy turf, I mused over bygone years in  
the  
sloping shadows of the evening, when slowly there came out  
from  
the folding darkness of foliage an apparition of beauty in  
the  
perfect form of a woman, and stood on a white slab of  
stone at  
the water's brink. It seemed that the heart of the earth  
must  
heave in joy under her bare white feet. Methought the  
vague  
veilings of her body should melt in ecstasy into air as  
the  
golden mist of dawn melts from off the snowy peak of the  
eastern  
hill. She bowed herself above the shining mirror of the  
lake and  
saw the reflection of her face. She started up in awe and  
stood  
still; then smiled, and with a careless sweep of her left  
arm  
unloosed her hair and let it trail on the earth at her  
feet. She  
bared her bosom and looked at her arms, so flawlessly  
modelled,  
and instinct with an exquisite caress. Bending her head  
she  
saw the sweet blossoming of her youth and the tender bloom  
and  
blush of her skin. She beamed with a glad surprise. So,  
if the  
white lotus bud on opening her eyes in the morning were to  
arch

her neck and see her shadow in the water, would she wonder  
at  
herself the livelong day. But a moment after the smile  
passed  
from her face and a shade of sadness crept into her eyes.  
She  
bound up her tresses, drew her veil over her arms, and  
sighing  
slowly, walked away like a beauteous evening fading into  
the  
night. To me the supreme fulfilment of desire seemed to  
have  
been revealed in a flash and then to have vanished. . . .  
But who  
is it that pushes the door?

*Enter CHITRA, dressed as a woman.*

Ah! it is she. Quiet, my heart! . . . Fear me not, lady!  
I am  
a Kshatriya.

*Chitra*

Honoured sir, you are my guest. I live in this temple. I  
know  
not in what way I can show you hospitality.

*Arjuna*

Fair lady, the very sight of you is indeed the highest  
hospitality. If you will not take it amiss I would ask  
you a  
question.

*Chitra*

You have permission.

*Arjuna*

*What stern vow keeps you immured in this solitary temple,  
depriving all mortals of a vision of so much loveliness?*

*Chitra*

*I harbour a secret desire in my heart, for the fulfilment  
of  
which I offer daily prayers to Lord Shiva.*

*Arjuna*

*Alas, what can you desire, you who are the desire of the  
whole  
world! From the easternmost hill on whose summit the  
morning sun  
first prints his fiery foot to the end of the sunset land  
have I  
travelled. I have seen whatever is most precious,  
beautiful and  
great on the earth. My knowledge shall be yours, only say  
for  
what or for whom you seek.*

*Chitra*

*He whom I seek is known to all.*

*Arjuna*

*Indeed! Who may this favourite of the gods be, whose fame  
has  
captured your heart?*

*Chitra*

*Sprung from the highest of all royal houses, the greatest  
of all  
heroes is he.*

*Arjuna*

Lady, offer not such wealth of beauty as is yours on the altar of false reputation. Spurious fame spreads from tongue to tongue like the fog of the early dawn before the sun rises. Tell me who in the highest of kingly lines is the supreme hero?

Chitra

Hermit, you are jealous of other men's fame. Do you not know that all over the world the royal house of the Kurus is the most famous?

Arjuna

The house of the Kurus!

Chitra

And have you never heard of the greatest name of that far-famed house?

Arjuna

From your own lips let me hear it.

Chitra

Arjuna, the conqueror of the world. I have culled from the mouths of the multitude that imperishable name and hidden it with care in my maiden heart. Hermit, why do you look perturbed? Has that name only a deceitful glitter? Say so, and I will

not

hesitate to break this casket of my heart and throw the  
false gem  
to the dust.

Arjuna

Be his name and fame, his bravery and prowess false or  
true, for  
mercy's sake do not banish him from your heart—for he  
kneels at  
your feet even now.

Chitra

You, Arjuna!

Arjuna

Yes, I am he, the love-hungered guest at your door.

Chitra

Then it is not true that Arjuna has taken a vow of  
chastity for  
twelve long years?

Arjuna

But you have dissolved my vow even as the moon dissolves  
the  
night's vow of obscurity.

Chitra

Oh, shame upon you! What have you seen in me that makes  
you  
false to yourself? Whom do you seek in these dark eyes,  
in these  
milk-white arms, if you are ready to pay for her the price

of

your probity? Not my true self, I know. Surely this  
cannot be  
love, this is not man's highest homage to woman! Alas,  
that this  
frail disguise, the body, should make one blind to the  
light of  
the deathless spirit! Yes, now indeed, I know, Arjuna,  
the fame  
of your heroic manhood is false.

Arjuna

Ah, I feel how vain is fame, the pride of prowess!  
Everything  
seems to me a dream. You alone are perfect; you are the  
wealth  
of the world, the end of all poverty, the goal of all  
efforts,  
the one woman! Others there are who can be but slowly  
known.  
While to see you for a moment is to see perfect  
completeness  
once and for ever.

Chitra

Alas, it is not I, not I, Arjuna! It is the deceit of a  
god.  
Go, go, my hero, go. Woo not falsehood, offer not your  
great  
heart to an illusion. Go.

## SCENE III

*Chitra*

*No, impossible. To face that fervent gaze that almost grasps you  
like clutching hands of the hungry spirit within; to feel his  
heart struggling to break its bounds urging its passionate cry  
through the entire body—and then to send him away like a beggar—no, impossible.*

*Enter MADANA and VASANTA.*

*Ah, god of love, what fearful flame is this with which thou hast  
enveloped me! I burn, and I burn whatever I touch.*

*Madana*

*I desire to know what happened last night.*

*Chitra*

*At evening I lay down on a grassy bed strewn with the petals of  
spring flowers, and recollected the wonderful praise of my beauty  
I had heard from Arjuna;—drinking drop by drop the honey that I  
had stored during the long day. The history of my past life like  
that of my former existences was forgotten. I felt like a flower,  
which has but a few fleeting hours to listen to all the*

humming flatteries and whispered murmurs of the woodlands  
and  
then must lower its eyes from the Sky, bend its head and  
at a  
breath give itself up to the dust without a cry, thus  
ending the  
short story of a perfect moment that has neither past nor  
future.

#### Vasanta

A limitless life of glory can bloom and spend itself in a  
morning.

#### Madana

Like an endless meaning in the narrow span of a song.

#### Chitra

The southern breeze caressed me to sleep. From the  
flowering  
Malati bower overhead silent kisses dropped over my body.  
On my hair, my breast, my feet, each flower chose a bed to  
die  
on. I slept. And, suddenly in the depth of my sleep, I  
felt as  
if some intense eager look, like tapering fingers of  
flame,  
touched my slumbering body. I started up and saw the  
Hermit  
standing before me. The moon had moved to the west,  
peering  
through the leaves to espy this wonder of divine art  
wrought in a  
fragile human frame. The air was heavy with perfume; the  
silence  
of the night was vocal with the chirping of crickets; the  
reflections of the trees hung motionless in the lake; and  
with  
his staff in his hand he stood, tall and straight and  
still, like

a forest tree. It seemed to me that I had, on opening my eyes,  
died to all realities of life and undergone a dream birth into a  
shadow land. Shame slipped to my feet like loosened clothes. I  
heard his call—"Beloved, my most beloved!" And all my forgotten  
lives united as one and responded to it. I said, "Take me, take  
all I am!" And I stretched out my arms to him. The moon set  
behind the trees. One curtain of darkness covered all. Heaven  
and earth, time and space, pleasure and pain, death and life  
merged together in an unbearable ecstasy. . . . With the first  
gleam of light, the first twitter of birds, I rose up and sat  
leaning on my left arm. He lay asleep with a vague smile about  
his lips like the crescent moon in the morning. The rosy red  
glow of the dawn fell upon his noble forehead. I sighed and  
stood up. I drew together the leafy lianas to screen the streaming sun from his face. I looked about me and saw the same  
old earth. I remembered what I used to be, and ran and ran like  
a deer afraid of her own shadow, through the forest path strewn  
with shephali flowers. I found a lonely nook, and sitting down  
covered my face with both hands, and tried to weep and cry. But  
no tears came to my eyes.

#### Madana

Alas, thou daughter of mortals! I stole from the divine Storehouse the fragrant wine of heaven, filled with it one earthly night to the brim, and placed it in thy hand to

drink—

yet still I hear this cry of anguish!

Chitra [bitterly]

Who drank it? The rarest completion of life's desire, the first union of love was proffered to me, but was wrested from my grasp?

This borrowed beauty, this falsehood that enwraps me, will slip

from me taking with it the only monument of that sweet union, as

the petals fall from an overblown flower; and the woman ashamed

of her naked poverty will sit weeping day and night. Lord Love,

this cursed appearance companions me like a demon robbing me of

all the prizes of love—all the kisses for which my heart is

athirst.

Madana

Alas, how vain thy single night had been! The barque of joy came

in sight, but the waves would not let it touch the shore.

Chitra

Heaven came so close to my hand that I forgot for a moment that

it had not reached me. But when I woke in the morning from my

dream I found that my body had become my own rival. It is my

hateful task to deck her every day, to send her to my beloved and

see her caressed by him. O god, take back thy boon!

Madana

But if I take it from you how can you stand before your lover?

To snatch away the cup from his lips when he has scarcely drained

his first draught of pleasure, would not that be cruel? With

what resentful anger he must regard thee then?

Chitra

That would be better far than this. I will reveal my true self

to him, a nobler thing than this disguise. If he rejects it, if

he spurns me and breaks my heart, I will bear even that in silence.

Vasanta

Listen to my advice. When with the advent of autumn the flowering season is over then comes the triumph of fruitage. A

time will come of itself when the heat-cloyed bloom of the body

will droop and Arjuna will gladly accept the abiding fruitful

truth in thee. O child, go back to thy mad festival.

## SCENE IV

*Chitra*

*WHY do you watch me like that, my warrior?*

*Arjuna*

*I watch how you weave that garland. Skill and grace, the twin brother and sister, are dancing playfully on your finger tips. I am watching and thinking.*

*Chitra*

*What are you thinking, sir?*

*Arjuna*

*I am thinking that you, with this same lightness of touch and sweetness, are weaving my days of exile into an immortal wreath, to crown me when I return home.*

*Chitra*

*Home! But this love is not for a home!*

*Arjuna*

*Not for a home?*

Chitra

No. Never talk of that. Take to your home what is  
abiding and  
strong. Leave the little wild flower where it was born;  
leave it  
beautifully to die at the day's end among all fading  
blossoms and  
decaying leaves. Do not take it to your palace hall to  
fling it  
on the stony floor which knows no pity for things that  
fade and  
are forgotten.

Arjuna

Is ours that kind of love?

Chitra

Yes, no other! Why regret it? That which was meant for  
idle  
days should never outlive them. Joy turns into pain when  
the  
door by which it should depart is shut against it. Take  
it and  
keep it as long as it lasts. Let not the satiety of your  
evening  
claim more than the desire of your morning could earn. . .  
. The  
day is done. Put this garland on. I am tired. Take me  
in your  
arms, my love. Let all vain bickerings of discontent die  
away at  
the sweet meeting of our lips.

Arjuna

Hush! Listen, my beloved, the sound of prayer bells from  
the  
distant village temple steals upon the evening air across

*the*

*silent trees!*

## SCENE V

*Vasanta*

*I CANNOT keep pace with thee, my friend! I am tired. It is a hard task to keep alive the fire thou hast kindled. Sleep overtakes me, the fan drops from my hand, and cold ashes cover the glow of the fire. I start up again from my slumber and with all my might rescue the weary flame. But this can go on no longer.*

*Madana*

*I know, thou art as fickle as a child. Ever restless is thy play in heaven and on earth. Things that thou for days buildest up with endless detail thou dost shatter in a moment without regret. But this work of ours is nearly finished. Pleasure-winged days fly fast, and the year, almost at its end, swoons in rapturous bliss.*

## SCENE VI

*Arjuna*

*I WOKE in the morning and found that my dreams had distilled a gem. I have no casket to inclose it, no king's crown whereon to fix it, no chain from which to hang it, and yet have not the heart to throw it away. My Kshatriya's right arm, idly occupied in holding it, forgets its duties.*

*Enter CHITRA.*

*Chitra*

*Tell me your thoughts, sir!*

*Arjuna*

*My mind is busy with thoughts of hunting today. See, how the rain pours in torrents and fiercely beats upon the hillside. The dark shadow of the clouds hangs heavily over the forest, and the swollen stream, like reckless youth, overleaps all barriers with mocking laughter. On such rainy days we five brothers would go to the Chitraka forest to chase wild beasts. Those were glad times. Our hearts danced to the drumbeat of rumbling clouds. The*

woods resounded with the screams of peacocks. Timid deer  
could  
not hear our approaching steps for the patter of rain and  
the  
noise of waterfalls; the leopards would leave their tracks  
on the  
wet earth, betraying their lairs. Our sport over, we  
dared each  
other to swim across turbulent streams on our way back  
home. The  
restless spirit is on me. I long to go hunting.

Chitra

First run down the quarry you are now following. Are you  
quite  
certain that the enchanted deer you pursue must needs be  
caught?  
No, not yet. Like a dream the wild creature eludes you  
when it  
seems most nearly yours. Look how the wind is chased by  
the mad  
rain that discharges a thousand arrows after it. Yet it  
goes  
free and unconquered. Our sport is like that, my love!  
You give  
chase to the fleet-footed spirit of beauty, aiming at her  
every  
dart you have in your hands. Yet this magic deer runs  
ever free  
and untouched.

Arjuna

My love, have you no home where kind hearts are waiting  
for your  
return? A home which you once made sweet with your gentle  
service and whose light went out when you left it for this  
wilderness?

Chitra

Why these questions? Are the hours of unthinking pleasure over?

Do you not know that I am no more than what you see before you?

For me there is no vista beyond. The dew that hangs on the tip

of a Kinsuka petal has neither name nor destination. It offers

no answer to any question. She whom you love is like that perfect bead of dew.

Arjuna

Has she no tie with the world? Can she be merely like a fragment

of heaven dropped on the earth through the carelessness of a

wanton god?

Chitra

Yes.

Arjuna

Ah, that is why I always seem about to lose you. My heart is

unsatisfied, my mind knows no peace. Come closer to me, unattainable one! Surrender yourself to the bonds of name and

and home and parentage. Let my heart feel you on all sides and live

with you in the peaceful security of love.

Chitra

Why this vain effort to catch and keep the tints of the clouds,

the dance of the waves, the smell of the flowers?

Arjuna

Mistress mine, do not hope to pacify love with airy  
nothings.

Give me something to clasp, something that can last longer  
than  
pleasure, that can endure even through suffering.

Chitra

Hero mine, the year is not yet full, and you are tired  
already!

Now I know that it is Heaven's blessing that has made the  
flower's term of life short. Could this body of mine have  
drooped and died with the flowers of last spring it surely  
would

have died with honour. Yet, its days are numbered, my  
love.

Spare it not, press it dry of honey, for fear your  
beggar's heart

come back to it again and again with unsated desire, like  
a  
thirsty bee when summer blossoms lie dead in the dust.

## SCENE VII

*Madana*

*TONIGHT is thy last night.*

*Vasanta*

*The loveliness of your body will return tomorrow to the  
inexhaustible stores of the spring. The ruddy tint of thy  
lips  
freed from the memory of Arjuna's kisses, will bud anew as  
a pair  
of fresh asoka leaves, and the soft, white glow of thy  
skin will  
be born again in a hundred fragrant jasmine flowers.*

*Chitra*

*O gods, grant me this my prayer! Tonight, in its last  
hour let  
my beauty flash its brightest, like the final flicker of a  
dying  
flame.*

*Madana*

*Thou shalt have thy wish.*

## SCENE VIII

*Villagers*

*WHO will protect us now?*

*Arjuna*

*Why, by what danger are you threatened?*

*Villagers*

*The robbers are pouring from the northern hills like a  
mountain  
flood to devastate our village.*

*Arjuna*

*Have you in this kingdom no warden?*

*Villagers*

*Princess Chitra was the terror of all evil doers. While  
she was  
in this happy land we feared natural deaths, but had no  
other  
fears. Now she has gone on a pilgrimage, and none knows  
where to  
find her.*

*Arjuna*

*Is the warden of this country a woman?*

Villagers

*Yes, she is our father and mother in one.*

*[Exeunt.]*

*Enter CHITRA.*

*Chitra*

*Why are you sitting all alone?*

*Arjuna*

*I am trying to imagine what kind of woman Princess Chitra may be.*

*I hear so many stories of her from all sorts of men.*

*Chitra*

*Ah, but she is not beautiful. She has no such lovely eyes as*

*mine, dark as death. She can pierce any target she will, but not*

*our hero's heart.*

*Arjuna*

*They say that in valour she is a man, and a woman in tenderness.*

*Chitra*

*That, indeed, is her greatest misfortune. When a woman is merely*

*a woman; when she winds herself round and round men's hearts with*

*her smiles and sobs and services and caressing endearments; then*

*she is happy. Of what use to her are learning and great*

achievements? Could you have seen her only yesterday in  
the  
court of the Lord Shiva's temple by the forest path, you  
would  
have passed by without deigning to look at her. But have  
you  
grown so weary of woman's beauty that you seek in her for  
a man's  
strength?

With green leaves wet from the spray of the foaming  
waterfall, I  
have made our noonday bed in a cavern dark as night.  
There the  
cool of the soft green mosses thick on the black and  
dripping  
stone, kisses your eyes to sleep. Let me guide you  
thither.

Arjuna

Not today, beloved.

Chitra

Why not today?

Arjuna

I have heard that a horde of robbers has neared the  
plains.  
Needs must I go and prepare my weapons to protect the  
frightened  
villagers.

Chitra

You need have no fear for them. Before she started on her  
pilgrimage, Princess Chitra had set strong guards at all  
the  
frontier passes.

Arjuna

Yet permit me for a short while to set about a Kshatriya's work.

With new glory will I ennoble this idle arm, and make of it a pillow more worthy of your head.

Chitra

What if I refuse to let you go, if I keep you entwined in my arms? Would you rudely snatch yourself free and leave me?

Go then! But you must know that the liana, once broken in two, never joins again. Go, if your thirst is quenched. But, if not,

then remember that the goddess of pleasure is fickle, and waits

for no man. Sit for a while, my lord! Tell me what uneasy

thoughts tease you. Who occupied your mind today? Is it Chitra?

Arjuna

Yes, it is Chitra. I wonder in fulfilment of what vow she has

gone on her pilgrimage. Of what could she stand in need?

Chitra

Her needs? Why, what has she ever had, the unfortunate creature?

Her very qualities are as prison walls, shutting her woman's

heart in a bare cell. She is obscured, she is unfulfilled. Her

womanly love must content itself dressed in rags; beauty is

denied her. She is like the spirit of a cheerless morning,  
sitting upon the stony mountain peak, all her light blotted out  
by dark clouds. Do not ask me of her life. It will never sound  
sweet to man's ear.

Arjuna

I am eager to learn all about her. I am like a traveller come to  
a strange city at midnight. Domes and towers and garden-trees  
look vague and shadowy, and the dull moan of the sea comes fitfully through the silence of sleep. Wistfully he waits for  
the morning to reveal to him all the strange wonders. Oh, tell  
me her story.

Chitra

What more is there to tell?

Arjuna

I seem to see her, in my mind's eye, riding on a white horse,  
proudly holding the reins in her left hand, and in her right a  
bow, and like the Goddess of Victory dispensing glad hope all  
round her. Like a watchful lioness she protects the litter at  
her dugs with a fierce love. Woman's arms, though adorned with  
naught but unfettered strength, are beautiful! My heart is  
restless, fair one, like a serpent reviving from his long winter's sleep. Come, let us both race on swift horses side by

side, like twin orbs of light sweeping through space. Out  
from  
this slumbrous prison of green gloom, this dank, dense  
cover of  
perfumed intoxication, choking breath.

Chitra

Arjuna, tell me true, if, now at once, by some magic I  
could  
shake myself free from this voluptuous softness, this  
timid bloom  
of beauty shrinking from the rude and healthy touch of the  
world,  
and fling it from my body like borrowed clothes, would you  
be  
able to bear it? If I stand up straight and strong with  
the  
strength of a daring heart spurning the wiles and arts of  
twining  
weakness, if I hold my head high like a tall young  
mountain fir,  
no longer trailing in the dust like a liana, shall I then  
appeal  
to man's eye? No, no, you could not endure it. It is  
better  
that I should keep spread about me all the dainty  
playthings of  
fugitive youth, and wait for you in patience. When it  
pleases  
you to return, I will smilingly pour out for you the wine  
of  
pleasure in the cup of this beauteous body. When you are  
tired  
and satiated with this wine, you can go to work or play;  
and when  
I grow old I will accept humbly and gratefully whatever  
corner is  
left for me. Would it please your heroic soul if the  
playmate of  
the night aspired to be the helpmeet of the day, if the  
left arm  
learnt to share the burden of the proud right arm?

Arjuna

I never seem to know you aright. You seem to me like a goddess  
hidden within a golden image. I cannot touch you, I cannot pay  
you my dues in return for your priceless gifts. Thus my love is  
incomplete. Sometimes in the enigmatic depth of your sad look,  
in your playful words mocking at their own meaning, I gain glimpses of a being trying to rend asunder the languorous grace  
of her body, to emerge in a chaste fire of pain through a vaporous veil of smiles. Illusion is the first appearance  
of Truth. She advances towards her lover in disguise. But a time  
comes when she throws off her ornaments and veils and stands  
clothed in naked dignity. I grope for that ultimate you, that  
bare simplicity of truth.

Why these tears, my love? Why cover your face with your hands?  
Have I pained you, my darling? Forget what I said. I will be  
content with the present. Let each separate moment of beauty  
come to me like a bird of mystery from its unseen nest in the  
dark bearing a message of music. Let me for ever sit  
with my hope on the brink of its realization, and thus end my days.

# SCENE IX

CHITRA and ARJUNA

Chitra [cloaked]

My lord, has the cup been drained to the last drop? Is this, indeed, the end? No, when all is done something still remains, and that is my last sacrifice at your feet.

I brought from the garden of heaven flowers of incomparable beauty with which to worship you, god of my heart. If the rites are over, if the flowers have faded, let me throw them out of the temple [unveiling in her original male attire]. Now, look at your worshipper with gracious eyes.

I am not beautifully perfect as the flowers with which I worshipped. I have many flaws and blemishes. I am a traveller in the great world-path, my garments are dirty, and my feet are bleeding with thorns. Where should I achieve

flower-beauty, the unsullied loveliness of a moment's life? The gift that I proudly bring you is the heart of a woman. Here have

all pains and joys gathered, the hopes and fears and shames of a daughter of the dust; here love springs up struggling toward immortal life. Herein lies an imperfection which yet is noble

and grand. If the flower-service is finished, my master, accept this as your servant for the days to come!

I am Chitra, the king's daughter. Perhaps you will remember the day when a woman came to you in the temple of Shiva, her body loaded with ornaments and finery. That shameless woman came to court you as though she were a man. You rejected her; you did well. My lord, I am that woman. She was my disguise. Then by the boon of gods I obtained for a year the most radiant form that a mortal ever wore, and wearied my hero's heart with the burden of that deceit. Most surely I am not that woman.

I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you deign to keep me by your side in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self. If your babe, whom I am nourishing in my womb be born a son, I shall myself teach him to be a second Arjuna, and send him to you when the time comes, and then at last you will truly know me. Today I can only offer you Chitra, the daughter of a king.

Arjuna

Beloved, my life is full.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CHITRA, A PLAY  
IN ONE ACT \*\*\*

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