Once upon a time there lived a vain Empress whose only worry in life was to dress in elegant clothes. She changed clothes almost every hour and loved to show them off to her people.

Word of the Empress's refined habits spread over her kingdom and beyond. Two scoundrels who had heard of the Empress's vanity decided to take advantage of it. They introduced themselves at the gates of the palace with a scheme in mind.

"We are two very good tailors and after many years of research we have invented an extraordinary method to weave a cloth so light and fine that it looks invisible. As a matter of fact it is invisible to anyone who is too stupid and incompetent to appreciate its quality."

The chief of the guards heard the scoundrel's strange story and sent for the court chamberlain. The chamberlain notified the prime minister, who ran to the Empress and disclosed the incredible news. The Empress's curiosity got the better of her and she decided to see the two scoundrels.

"Besides being invisible, your Highness, this cloth will be woven in colors and patterns created especially for you." The Empress gave the two men a bag of gold coins in exchange for their promise to begin working on the fabric immediately.

"Just tell us what you need to get started and we'll give it to you." The two scoundrels asked for a loom, silk, gold thread and then pretended to begin working. The Empress thought she had spent her money quite well: in addition to getting a new extraordinary suit, he would discover which of her subjects were ignorant and incompetent. A few days later, she called the old and wise prime minister, who was considered by everyone as a man with common sense.

"Go and see how the work is proceeding," the Empress told him, "and come back to let me know."

The prime minister was welcomed by the two scoundrels.

"We're almost finished, but we need a lot more gold thread. Here, Excellency! Admire the colors, feel the softness!" The old man bent over the loom and tried to see the fabric that was not there. He felt cold sweat on his forehead.

"I can't see anything," he thought. "If I see nothing, that means I'm stupid! Or, worse, incompetent!" If the prime minister admitted that he didn't see anything, he would be discharged from his office.

"What a marvelous fabric, he said then. "I'll certainly tell the Empress." The two scoundrels rubbed their hands gleefully. They had almost made it. More thread was requested to finish the work.

Finally, the Empress received the announcement that the two tailors had come to take all the measurements needed to sew her new suit.

"Come in," the Empress ordered. Even as they bowed, the two scoundrels pretended to be holding large roll of fabric.

"Here it is your Highness, the result of our labour," the scoundrels said. "We have worked night and day but, at last, the most beautiful fabric in the world is ready for you. Look at the colors and feel how fine it is." Of course the Empress did not see any colors and could not feel any cloth between her fingers. She panicked and felt like fainting. But luckily the throne was right behind him and she sat down. But when she realized that no one could know that she did not see the fabric, she felt better. Nobody could find out she was stupid and incompetent. And the Empress didn't know that everybody else around her thought and did the very same thing.

The farce continued as the two scoundrels had foreseen it. Once they had taken the measurements, the two began cutting the air with scissors while sewing with their needles an invisible cloth.

"Your Highness, you'll have to take off your clothes to try on your new ones." The two scoundrels draped the new clothes on her and then held up a mirror. The Empress was embarrassed but since none of his bystanders were, she felt relieved.

"Yes, this is a beautiful suit and it looks very good on me," the Empress said trying to look comfortable. "You've done a fine job."

"Your Majesty," the prime minister said, "we have a request for you. The people have found out about this extraordinary fabric and they are anxious to see you in your new suit." The Empress was doubtful showing herself naked to the people, but then she abandoned her fears. After all, no one would know about it except the ignorant and the incompetent.

"All right," she said. "I will grant the people this privilege." She summoned her carriage and the ceremonial parade was formed. A group of dignitaries walked at the very front of the procession and anxiously scrutinized the faces of the people in the street. All the people had gathered in the main square, pushing and shoving to get a better look. An applause welcomed the regal procession. Everyone wanted to know how stupid or incompetent his or her neighbor was but, as the Empress passed, a strange murmur rose from the crowd.

Everyone said, loud enough for the others to hear: "Look at the Empress's new clothes. They're beautiful!"

"What a marvellous train!"

"And the colors! The colors of that beautiful fabric! I have never seen anything like it in my life!"

They all tried to conceal their disappointment at not being able to see the clothes, and since nobody was willing to admit his own stupidity and incompetence, they all behaved as the two scoundrels had predicted.

A child, however, who had no important job and could only see things as his eyes showed them to him, went up to the carriage.

"The Empress is naked," he said.

"Fool!" his father reprimanded, running after him. "Don't talk nonsense!" He grabbed his child and took him away. But the boy's remark, which had been heard by the bystanders, was repeated over and over again until everyone cried:

"The boy is right! The Empress is naked! It's true!"

The Empress realized that the people were right but could not admit to that. She thought it better to continue the procession under the illusion that anyone who couldn't see his clothes was either stupid or incompetent. And she stood stiffly on his carriage, while behind him a page held her imaginary mantle.