

The Emperor's Test

From the book, "Children's Classics in Dramatic Form" by Augusta Stevenson

CHARACTERS:

The Emperor
The General
The Captain
First Aide
Second Aide
The Mayor's Wife
The Mayor's Son
The Rich Merchant's Wife
The Rich Merchant's Son
The Poor Woodcutter's Wife
Pierre (The son of the Poor Woodcutter's Wife)
Ludwig

SCENE I

TIME: One spring; noon

PLACE: An army camp on the banks of a large creek. A village is nearby. To the south is a great forest.

(An ante-room in the Emperor's tent is seen. Great curtains separate this room from the Emperor's room back. An Aide waits in the ante-room. Enter the General from the Emperor's room.)

GENERAL: *(To the Aide.)* Have any yet come from the village? The Emperor would know.

AIDE: Yes, General. They wait without.

GENERAL: Bid them enter.

AIDE: *(Crossing; speaking to those without.)* You will please enter.

(Enter the Mayor's Wife and Son; The Rich Merchant's Wife and Son.)

GENERAL: You have come to see the Emperor?

THE LADIES: General, we have.

GENERAL: His Majesty wishes you to leave your sons here in camp until evening.

MAYOR'S WIFE: General, could you not tell us the Emperor's plans?

GENERAL: Yes, madam. The Emperor must march southward where the enemy is in camp. He wishes a guide who can lead him safely through this great forest.

RICH MERCHANT'S WIFE: We were told the Emperor would greatly honor the lad he chooses.

GENERAL: 'T is true, madam. The lad chosen will be made an aide.

MAYOR'S WIFE: I thought only princes were chosen for the Emperor's aides.

GENERAL: They have always been princes. This is a great opportunity for the lads of this village.

MAYOR'S WIFE: But how will the Emperor make a choice?

GENERAL: A test will be given every boy who comes. This test will prove his fitness to be guide.

(Enter an Aide from Emperor's room.)

AIDE: General, the Emperor would see you.

(The General bows to the ladies and leaves.)

AIDE: *(Turning to the ladies.)* The Emperor will receive you presently. *(Aide goes.)*

(Enter the Poor Woodcutter's Wife and Son.)

POOR WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: *(Timidly.)* I heard the Emperor wanted a guide.

MAYOR'S WIFE: The Emperor only wants the boys of the best families, madam.

(Enter the Emperor, General, and Captain; they remain back; are not seen by the ladies.)

POOR WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: *(Sighing.)* I suppose that is true, but Pierre is a smart boy. If the Emperor could only see him—

RICH MERCHANT'S WIFE: *(Interrupting.)* The Emperor wants a boy with proud manners such as our boys have.

EMPEROR: *(Indignantly.)* Fiddlesticks!

THE LADIES: *(Bowing.)* Your Highness!

EMPEROR: Fiddlesticks and candles, I say!

POOR WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: I am sorry, your Majesty. I didn't know how it was. Come, Pierre. *(She turns to go.)*

EMPEROR: Remain. Pierre shall have the test with the others. Ladies, you shall know whom I have chosen when the test is finished. I bid you good-day.

(The ladies bow and go.)

EMPEROR: *(Turning to the boys.)* My lads, go through the forest southward, till you come to the river. You may then return. Captain, see that guards go with them. My lads, you must not speak the one to the other until I have again seen you. I must have your word on that. Do you promise?

BOYS: Sire, we promise.

EMPEROR: 'T is well. Captain, they are now in your charge. General, a word with you.

(The Emperor and General go into Emperor's room. The Captain leads the boys from the tent.)

SCENE II

TIME: Two hours later

PLACE: The Emperor's tent; the Emperor's room

(The Emperor is seen sitting at a table looking at maps. Enter an Aide. He salutes.)

EMPEROR: Well?

AIDE: The prisoner has returned, sire.

EMPEROR: What prisoner?

AIDE: The one sent out for the test, sire.

EMPEROR: Who was sent?

AIDE: Ludwig, the prisoner who has been ill for so long.

EMPEROR: Ah, yes; bid him enter.

(Aide goes; he reenters with Ludwig, who wears an old, torn army cloak over his uniform. He salutes.)

EMPEROR: I notice you are a bit lame, Ludwig.

LUDWIG: Yes, sire; in my left leg. My dog was hit at the same time.

EMPEROR: Does your dog go to battle with you?

LUDWIG: If he can slip into the ranks, sire. He always goes where I go, sire.

EMPEROR: Then he went with you today, of course?

LUDWIG: Yes, sire.

EMPEROR: You are sure the boys didn't see you?

LUDWIG: No one saw me. I kept a sharp lookout. When I came to a clear space I went to one side, hiding behind trees, to look ahead. Then I ran across.

EMPEROR: That must have tired you, Ludwig. You're not quite well yet.

LUDWIG: I found I couldn't leap the streams; I had to climb down the banks and wade them.

EMPEROR: You rested by the way, didn't you?

LUDWIG: Yes, sire, and once I stopped to pick berries.

EMPEROR: You made the return trip by boat up the creek?

LUDWIG: Yes, sire.

EMPEROR: That is all.

(The Aide and Ludwig go. The Emperor claps his hands. Enter Second Aide. He salutes.)

EMPEROR: *(To Aide.)* Have the lads returned?

SECOND AIDE: No, sire.

EMPEROR: Do you know when the Captain expects them?

SECOND AIDE: In about half an hour, sire.

EMPEROR: Bid their mothers return at that time. I wish them to be present at the test.

SECOND AIDE: Yes, sire. *(He salutes and goes.)*

EMPEROR: *(Slowly.)* Let me see—a lame man; a lame dog; running footprints across open spaces; wading streams instead of leaping them; stopping to pick berries—Why, the story reads itself! *(He sits at table; takes up maps.)* Well, we shall see what we shall see!

SCENE III

TIME: A half hour later

PLACE: The Emperor's tent; the ante-room

(The ladies wait in the lower end of ante-room. Back is a great armchair.)

MAYOR'S WIFE: I cannot think why the boys were sent into the forest!

RICH MERCHANT'S WIFE: Nor I! It seems to me the Emperor should have asked them what they could do. Now, my boy dances so prettily!

MAYOR'S WIFE: I was certain he would ask them to ride. Now, my boy rides so well—just like a prince!

RICH MERCHANT'S WIFE: Well, he will no doubt ask them all these things upon their return. *(She turns to Pierre's mother.)* You see, madam, how little chance your boy has. I am sure he cannot dance?

POOR WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: *(Sadly.)* No, madam.

MAYOR'S WIFE: I am certain he does not ride?

POOR WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: *(Sighing.)* No, madam.

(Enter an Aide; crosses to Emperor's room; announces at curtains.)

AIDE: The boys have returned, sire!

(Enter the Captain with the boys. Enter the General from Emperor's room.)

GENERAL: *(Announcing.)* The Emperor!

(Enter the Emperor; all bow.)

EMPEROR: *(Sitting in armchair.)* I will now give the test. Captain, bring up the first boy.

(The Captain brings up the Rich Merchant's Son.)

EMPEROR: Well, my lad, what did you see in the forest?

RICH MERCHANT'S SON: Many, many trees, sire.

EMPEROR: You saw nothing but trees?

RICH MERCHANT'S SON: That was all, sire—just trees.

EMPEROR: I shall not want you; you may go.

RICH MERCHANT'S WIFE: Oh, your Majesty, if you could only see him dance!

EMPEROR: Candles and cheese! Do I want a dancing guide? Captain, bring up the next one.

(The Captain brings up the Mayor's Son.)

EMPEROR: Well, my lad, what did you see in the forest?

MAYOR'S SON: I saw trees and bushes, sire.

EMPEROR: Nothing more?

MAYOR'S SON: No, sire.

EMPEROR: I shall not want you; you may go.

MAYOR'S WIFE: Oh, your Majesty, if you could only see him ride! Just like a prince, sire!

EMPEROR: Fiddlesticks! Captain, the last boy there.

(The Captain brings up Pierre.)

EMPEROR: Well, my lad, what did you see in the forest?

PIERRE: I saw that a man had passed southward just before us, sire.

EMPEROR: How did you know that? Did you see him?

PIERRE: No, sire, I saw his footprints. He was lame in the left leg.

EMPEROR: How did you learn that?

PIERRE: The footprints were deeper on the right side. His dog was lame also.

EMPEROR: He had a dog?

PIERRE: Yes, sire; a lame dog I'm sure, because one of his tracks was always faint or missing.

EMPEROR: Did you trace this man and dog by their footprints?

PIERRE: Yes, sire, to the river. There were traces of them in the grass, in the mud, in the dust, on rocks, and in still water. I am certain they had passed but a short time before—not more than a half hour.

EMPEROR: How could you tell that?

PIERRE: The grass had not yet straightened up. The tracks in the mud had not yet filled with water. The prints in the dust were still clear although a wind was blowing.

EMPEROR: Good! But how did you know they had but just passed through still water and over rocks?

PIERRE: The water had not yet settled, and the rocks were still damp.

EMPEROR: Good! Very good!

PIERRE: Sire, I fear this man is one of the enemy!

EMPEROR: Indeed! What proof have you of that?

PIERRE: This, sire. (*Handing a small piece of cloth to Emperor.*) 'T is the color of the enemy's uniform.

EMPEROR: It is, my lad. How came you by it?

PIERRE: I found it on a thorn-bush. It was torn from his cloak, sire.

EMPEROR: And why from his cloak?

PIERRE: The thorn-bush was at least three feet from the man's line of travel. The wind blew the cloak about.

EMPEROR: (*Handing the cloth to an aide; whispering to him.*) Take this to Ludwig.

(*The Aide goes.*)

EMPEROR: Well, Pierre, do you think we should be in fear of this enemy?

PIERRE: I do not know, sire. I only know that he has a good disposition.

EMPEROR: (*Surprised.*) A good disposition? How do you know that?

PIERRE: The dog was always near him. When the man stopped to rest, the dog lay down at his feet.

EMPEROR: But he may have held the dog there, my lad.

PIERRE: Not while he was picking berries, sire.

EMPEROR: So our enemy picked berries, did he?

PIERRE: Yes, sire, the dog lying by the bushes all the while.

EMPEROR: Do you think we could capture this man?

PIERRE: Yes, sire, for he was very tired.

EMPEROR: How do you know that?

PIERRE: He climbed down the banks of every small stream. I should have leaped them.

EMPEROR: You think it would be an easy matter, then, to follow and capture him?

PIERRE: Not easy, sire, for he was always on the lookout.

EMPEROR: How do you know that?

PIERRE: Whenever he reached a clear space, he went to one side, hiding behind trees to look ahead. Then he ran across the open.

EMPEROR: Your proof of this, my lad?

PIERRE: His footprints in every clear space showed only the balls of the feet.

EMPEROR: Good! You followed him only to the river.

PIERRE: Those were the orders, sire. Had I gone on, I could have overtaken him by evening.

EMPEROR: That you could not, my lad, for the man is now here, in camp. He returned by boat. Ladies, the test is over. *(He turns to Pierre's mother.)* Madam, your son shall be my guide. I am proud to have a boy of such keen sight and quick thought in my kingdom. And 't is much to be the mother of such a lad. I salute you, madam! With greatest respect I salute you! *(He bows to the happy woman with great courtesy. He then turns to the other ladies.)* Ladies, I bid thee farewell.