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with whom she could claim any sort of acquaintance passed by. It was Fritz of Friedrichsheim, the gentleman who had called himself Herr Lugner, and instead of waltzing with a rose-cheeked, short-skirted lady, as most of the men skaters were doing, he was skating slowly round with another of his own sex, deep still to all appearances in a most engrossing conversation.

Phoebe Perowne sighed a little indignantly and executed another "eight."

"You seem to have effected a good deal since we parted yesterday," Fritz was saying to his companion. "Herr Drechsler, the leader of the Social Democrats, is to present a petition from the House of Representatives to the Rathsherren, advocating my claim to the Regency; Herr Neumann, the brewer, who is Mayor of Weldenbruck, is to present a similar petition on behalf of the Town Council. You have pulled the strings cleverly. I hope the Rathsherren will be edified."

"The Rathsherren will be furious," said Saunders, "especially the President, the Freiherr of Kraag."

"Then what good shall we do?"

"None at all. But we shall be playing the game. We shall in all probability have to ride roughshod over the Rathsherren, but they are gentlemen, and it behooves us to ask politely for a favour before forcibly taking our own way."

"And can you trust Drechsler and Neumann?" asked Fritz, after a pause.

"I can trust Drechsler. He is a strong man—plebeian, but honourable. I paid him the compliment of neither employing bribery nor intimidation."

"And Neumann?" asked Fritz.

"He insulted him with both."

"He is weak?"

"Weak—as his own beer."

Fritz laughed.

"Yet it seems we are relying on this brewer for the most hazardous part of our enterprise," he said.

"I know," agreed Saunders. "But we have no alternative. Neumann's bottling-yard adjoins the back premises of the Strafeburg, where the Rathsherren hold their fateful Council. As you know, the aristocratic Councillors have a weakness for the democratic liquor, and from time immemorial it has been customary for a vat to be flowing in liquid accompaniment to their fountains of rhetoric and wisdom. The Council Chamber is full of beer-barrels, and one more or less will not be noticeable. But it is absolutely necessary for us to have someone concealed in an empty barrel this afternoon, in order to learn what decision the august assembly arrives at."

"Quite so," agreed Fritz, "and therefore it is necessary for us, I suppose, to take Neumann into our confidence."

"Unless, of course," said Saunders, "some member of the Rathsherren will be kind enough to convey the information to us himself."

"That is unthinkable," said Fritz. "Their decision will be kept secret according to precedent, for a week. It is imperative for us to receive reliable and immediate information as to their choice of Regent. A week between their decision and its official proclamation is none too long to work in."

"But you have friends among the Rathsherren," hazarded Saunders; "could they not possibly give us the facts we require?"

"Yes, I have friends," said Fritz. "Grauberg is my friend, so is Laubenhau, so is Tortonform. But they are Rathsherren first and my friends afterwards—a long way afterwards."

"Then we must rely on the unreliable Neumann," said Saunders.

"So it seems. By the way, whom do you fancy for the trustworthy listener in the empty beer-barrel?"

"I thought of myself," said Saunders.

"You are too big, dear friend."

"Meyer then."

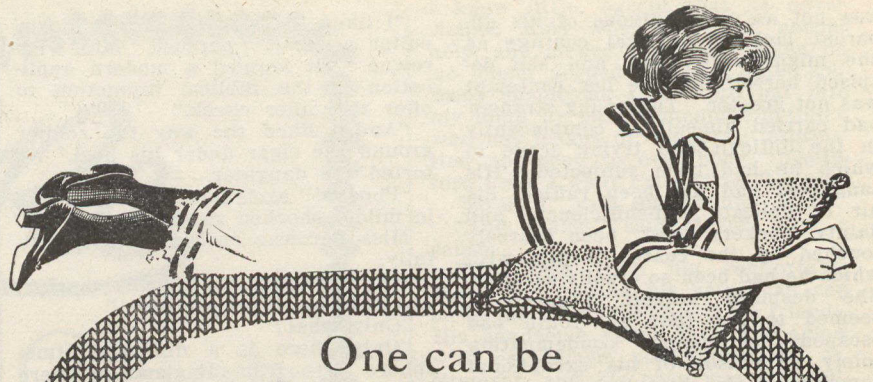
"He is too nervous," objected Fritz.

"Bilderbaum."

"Is too stupid. No, Saunders, I am the person who is going to play the humble role of eavesdropper."

"But I thought you had given up risks," Saunders objected.

"I have given up wine, women and cards—and unnecessary risks. If I



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