The Golden Chessman
By Lucas Mohan

"Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité" cried the striped flag of the Glorious Republic, and the brisk winter wind carried the cry to all the great city. "The Duchess of Anjou, Dukes of Guise and Châtellerault and families," said the executioner about his daily task. The streets were blanketed in clean white snow, excepting those places streaked by the bodies of the unfortunate ***aristos*** being dragged from the guillotine. The drums rolled, and the knife, stained forever red, fell once more. This was Paris, and indeed all of France, in the year of 1793.

On the cold, wind-blown streets of Paris, Citizen Jacques Colbert, one of the many watchmakers of the large city, wandered aimlessly, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his thin coat. The cold bit hard as he made his way slowly to the residence of his good friend, the well-known merchant Edmond St. Marie. He looked for shelter from the fierce wind, and found it in the form of the tall sturdy walls of the ***Palais Egalité,*** formerly the Palace of Cardinal Richelieu, which had been turned into a headquarters for the leaders of the Republic after it had been sacked and the many riches it contained stolen. At the moment it lay empty, its most important use being as a shield from the angry elements, breaking the savage wind and the whirling snow. Out of the corner of his eye, Colbert caught sight of something half buried in white-clad ground. On closer examination, he noticed that it had a luster that stood out from its drab surroundings. He picked it up excitedly and saw that it was a small gilded chessman. A small trinket left behind by the plunderers. No, by the weight he decided it must be solid gold. For a second, he was filled with doubt. Jacques Colbert was an honest man and he felt a pang of guilt to take something so valuable. He put it back where he had found it, then hesitated once more. "I am a poor man," he said to himself, and once more reached out and took the golden chessman.

In a handsome brick residence which stood alongside ***la Rue de Cleri,*** two men sat talking and playing chess. "Pray, take another glass, Colbert," said Edmond St. Marie to his friend, "Life is difficult nowadays. A man must have his share of vices." He refilled a glass tumbler with strong port wine and handed it to Colbert.

"Edmond, you mustn't. Any more of this hospitable onslaught, and I shall be unfit to walk home!" said Colbert, nevertheless taking the glass. "What an idea! Walk home indeed!

Preposterous! How ludicrous! Completely farcical!" cried St. Marie, somewhat overpowered by the liquor. "Retain your adjectives, my friend," said Colbert quietly, as he took his move on the chessboard. Edmond St. Marie was, unlike his friend, very well off. So it was his custom, as he had more hospitality to offer, to

invite Colbert for their weekly games of chess. These games, Colbert systematically won, for though he was certainly the poorer of the two, he was just as certainly the shrewder.

"The Arabian Mate, my friend," said Colbert, when the game had ended in the usual manner. "Simple and effective, like yourself," said St. Marie, accepting his fate and that of his miniature wooden entourage with perfect good humor.

"I believe there is nothing so perfect a solace in these troubled times as a good game of chess," said Colbert with a sigh of content. "Of what trouble do you speak?" asked St. Marie. His friend looked up, startled by this icy address from the previously jovial St. Marie.

"Every day I see it, Edmond, every day. The drums beat, then the knife falls and the head of yet another petty ***aristo*** is laid at the feet of citizen Robespierre. It seems the wrong word to use, but I am tired of the endless slaughter," said Colbert shaking his head. The rest of the evening past in uncomfortable silence. When the time came to go, Colbert gave a hearty farewell to Edmond, who replied cordially, then marched back inside. The idea of taking the carriage being evidently disposed of, Colbert walked home.

Three weeks later, as Colbert was working diligently in his small workshop which sidled the ***Rue de la Loi,*** the door swung open with no warning, revealing one of the infamous officers of the First French Republic, those long arms of Danton and Robespierre who reach out and snare their victims with no arousal from the other ingenuous citizens.

"You are Citizen Jacques Colbert, are you not?" asked the officer.

"I am," replied Colbert.

"You are to come with me immediately," commanded the officer, giving no explanation. Colbert said nothing, but left his work and obeyed, following him to a wooden barge which stood waiting in the brown waters of the river Seine. The barge left the wharf, then began to float slowly down the river, the water churning slowly at her keel. Colbert questioned the officer for reasons for his arrest, but in vain. Colbert had long given up his prodding when the officer, suddenly, and with little apparent cause, shoved Colbert with his elbow and pointed to a tall stone building which waxed on the horizon. Colbert gasped, and the officer laughed boisterously: for the object of Colbert's despair and the officer's amusement was none other than ***la Conciergerie,*** prison of the Jacobins. Colbert moved quickly, attempting to leap over the bulwarks beyond which lay his only chance for freedom. But the officer had anticipated him, and he had not moved three steps when he felt the sharp jab of a musket butt hit his side with a sickening crack, and he fell to the deck, gasping.

He soon found himself on the dirty floor of a small cell. The only possession he had brought with him save the clothes on his back was the golden chessman. He had kept it with him ever since he had found it, and had not had the heart to sell it. As he looked at it, he began to think of bribing the guards, of escape, of freedom. He looked at the letter of accusation which, after being read aloud, was tossed mockingly at him. He had been permitted to take it with him into the prison, and now he held it and read it, his head bursting with anger and resentment against the unnamed writer of document. It was set down in a curious, left-leaning hand which was scrawled and yet simultaneously refined and accomplished.

The letter ran thus:

"In the name of the First French Republic, I hereby accuse and condemn Citizen Jacques Colbert, as he has traitorously opposed our glorious cause in word and deed, and deserves the full punishment meted out by the law. I ask that the above be housed indefinitely in ***la Conciergerie*** so that he may inflict no more damage to our people's great republic. I have no more to ask other than that my identity remain anonymous to the accused Jacques Colbert."

After reading over the document Colbert looked up and saw that in the far corner, a man sat looking at him quietly. The man arose, and walking forward, he took the paper and scanned it quickly. The prisoner handed back the paper and returned to his dark corner. After a long silence, it became clear to Colbert that the man had been struck dumb, doubtless by some foul illness caused by the filth of the cell. Though the mute could not speak, he could listen for hours on end with continued interest, and so Colbert passed the time by telling him of his life leading up to his arrest: of his friends, and his profession, and the mute would listen as only a mute can.

And so his life continued for six months. At the end of those months, he fell ill, and due to the conditions of the cell, his condition soon worsened. His life was despaired of. As he lay dying, he overheard the guards at the barred door of the cell discussing the news from the outside world. With his last bit of strength, he sat up to listen. He heard them speaking of a prosperous merchant who had lately fallen into debt, and would soon be forced to sell his house and fine possessions to pay them off. His name was none other than Edmond St. Marie. Colbert fell back, stunned. Then as a last wish he handed the golden chessman to the mute, imploring him to have it sent to St. Marie. Colbert did not know how a mute prisoner could accomplish such a feat, yet still he begged unceasingly, until the mute finally took the chessman. The mute sat back and shook his head, for he knew the darker side of human nature. If only he could speak, he could have told his ingenuous fellow prisoner the truth. He had once served as the king's

magistrate, and had taught himself to suspect everyone. He knew who wrote the letter of accusation. He knew who had sent Colbert to wither and die in this lonely dungeon. For the most trivial remark may turn friend to bitter enemy. He looked at the golden chessman in his hand, and hesitated. Then he made up his mind. For the last wishes of a dead man must be kept.