

# The Conqueror

Mark Clifton

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MARK CLIFTON

# THE CONQUEROR

## FACTS ON THE CULTURE OF DAHLIAS:

1. The dahlia does not breed true from seed. Every seedling is a mutant.
2. A favorable mutant is propagated by tuber division, and as such remains reasonably fast.
3. It is possible to average ten plants from one each year. In twelve years one could have a hundred billion plants from one mutation.
4. Every gardener who grows dahlias throws away bushels of unwanted tubers. He has speculated numerous times on what a bountiful food supply they would make if they were only edible.
5. The dahlia is not too fussy about its soil, and with proper selection and care it may be matured from the equator to the arctic.
6. The dahlia grows wild in Guatemala, and through the centuries has self-seeded into endless mutations. It is reasonable to assume that one of these mutations might have peculiar properties—most peculiar indeed.

Padre Tomás christened him Juan Rafael de la Medina Torres, and so of naturally he was called Pepe. By the time he was of five years his body had begun to lose its infant roundness and his Indian cheekbones already showed their promise. Under his tangled black hair and behind his snapping black eyes there were dreams.

For one who knew only the path leading down the side of the volcano to the village at its foot, where also stood the mission; or the path leading up the side of the mountain to his papa's precarious corn and bean patches; or the path leading around the side of the volcano and down to the coffee finca; these were dreams indeed.

His papa would shake his head in slow bewilderment and remind Pepe, without too much affection or harshness either, that instead of conquering the world he would better think more about gathering of the grass to dry for his mama's weaving, or to thatch the roof, or for sleep upon the dirt floor of their hut.

Sometimes Pepe was to be a powerful brujo, even more respected than the wizard of the village—yes, much more than such a one who was old and without teeth and did not use his magic powers to make people do things. When he became so powerful, then would he torture and shame his sister for her taunts and jibes. Of naturally, he would not hurt her too much, for that would make Padre Tomás angry with him. So, after he had caused her enough suffering then would

he forgive her and dress her as rich as the señora Norte Americana he saw one day in the village market place.

But most of the time he dreamed much grander dreams than that. He dreamed of being even as el Presidente de Guatemala. Pepe had never seen el Presidente who lived in a fine palace in Guatemala City, but he suspected that such a one might be almost as grand as Padre Tomás himself.

Then there would be plenty of tortillas and beans always. Everyone could pack his belly so tight it would glisten like a shining gourd in the sun. No, that was not too much for such a powerful politico as he would be. To all the world he would become even as a father. It would be necessary for him first to conquer the world, and perhaps he would have to punish people a little to make them respect him, but then he would give it of all these things. Such were the dreams of Pepe, christened Juan Rafael de la Medina Torres.

So it was until one day.

Of naturally, Pepe knew the wild dahlia roots were not fit to eat. All the world knows that much, even that ignorant señora Norte Americana who knew nothing else, no nothing never at all. The silly questions she asked about every little thing. Still, the dahlia tubers were so succulent to look upon, almost like the yam, each time he dug them up he would taste them a little, just perhaps.

One day when he was supposed to be gathering grass he accidentally tugged and strained and finally pulled up one dahlia. It was a fine one with a big stalk and many tubers.

Tentatively, he broke one of the tubers and tasted of it. A look of bliss came over his face, for it was indeed good to eat.

His sister, ever loud in the mouth, was hiding in a greville tree, spying on him. She scrambled to the ground and ran tattling to her mama that Pepe was eating of the dirt again. Mama wearily lay down her weaving of the grass mats and stood to her feet. Ordinarily Pepe would have run away to hide when he saw her coming, shouting imprecations at him, but this time he sat and handed his mamacita a piece of the tuber when she came up to him.

His unusual conduct so startled her that instead of cuffing at him, she stopped and sniffed at the root suspiciously. The same rapture spread over her face when she tasted. She carefully gathered up the tightly packed bunch of tubers, containing the crown where the next year's plant buds lay dormant and waiting.

Marguerita, the sister, watched them both with wide eyes and with her bucktoothed mouth closed for once. Wiping her nose with her finger, she came closer, but not so close that Pepe could strike out and hit her. She stretched out her hand for a taste. Her slanting eyes stretched wider still and her mouth hung open in surprise when Pepe as well as her mama freely offered her bits of the tuber. The little wild one tasted also of the root.

No one looked on in surprise when she threw her arms about her little brother and called him "Pepito." Even this unheard of action did not ruffle his serenity.

Now with care the three of them uprooted all the other dahlias in the glade beside the path, but these were harsh and bitter. Only this one plant was good of the taste.

Mama handled her machete as skillfully as a surgeon's scalpel when she split the crown again and again, so that each bud had one tuber hanging below it for stored food to grow upon. While Pepe and his sister stood by and watched, she planted the ten tubers in the rich volcanic earth close by the doorway of their hut. There she could watch and care for them tenderly.

Papa would think she had gone sick in the head if he knew she was growing the dahlia, so she cut a small bit from the end of one of the tubers and saved it for him.

All through the rest of the day, she and her children worked peacefully and industriously together. So long as he could return frequently to look upon the place where the tubers had been planted, Pepe was happy. He gathered more grass to weave than ever before.

Marguerita, too, for the first time, bent herself willingly to the task of learning to weave of the petates. She stopped her work only to get up occasionally and look upon the moist soft earth where the dahlias had been planted. Mama did not scold her for this, for mama also found that she must look upon the spot a little time more or less.

The sun was down and the cold wet clouds were swirling around the mountain when papa came back from his day of work in the coffee finca. His black eyes glittered with sudden



anger and his face became as the thunder of Fuego when he saw no smoke filtering through the grass thatch of their roof, and smelled no odor of beans cooking for his supper. But the unusual sight of his wife and children weaving industriously in the dusk stopped his outburst.

When mama saw his shadow darken the doorway, she sprang to her feet like a light and active girl again. She held out a piece of the tuber as he came through the doorway. He took it, looked at it, and back at her.

"Eat of it," she said.

With bewilderment and perhaps a little fear replacing his anger, he bit tentatively at the edge of the fragment. With the one taste his face took on the same rapture which his family had known all through the afternoon.

It was the middle of the next day before any of them knew hunger again.

In several more days the bliss faded from their faces as the narcotic value of the tuber wore away. Pepe and his sister fought like wild animals again, while mama cuffed and shouted at them as ever. Papa was alternately harsh and silent as usual.

Still, all the family carefully watched the patch where the dahlias had been planted. Even in their most angry scuffling, Pepe and Marguerita never failed to keep clear of the dahlia bed.

The pale and succulent shoots came to the surface of the ground and grew with great rapidity. Daily, and almost hourly, the family watched the ten plants to see that no worm or bug damaged the shoots, to see that the bony wild chickens did not pick off the tender buds, to see that the yellow dog did not make a bed among them where it could ease its rickety bones.

In two months the dahlias began to bloom, and the Torres family knew that under the cover of the soil new clusters of tubers were forming. The leaves, the petals of the flower, these were not good of the taste, but when the blossoms opened there was a delicate perfume which wafted through the doorway of the hut and around the yard.

Again, in the fragrance, the Torres family became peaceful and good. Now there was no harsh word spoken. Now papa was no longer to be found lying in the perfume of the suquinay tree drinking of his chica where one minute he would threaten his friends with the machete and the next he would weep with remorse. Marguerita no longer teased Pepe but spent her days crooning monotonously at her weaving. No longer did Pepe fashion of the traps to catch and torture the parrots.

No longer were there the many and many sins to confess to Padre Tomás.

Finally Padre Tomás could bear it no longer. Well he knew his Indians, and he knew there must be something most wrong at the house of Torres. No Indians could possibly be

as good as these pretended in the confessional. He began to fear for their very souls.

So it was in his rounds he came upon the Torres hut one day when they were digging the plants of the dahlia. He looked with great surprise upon their careful handling of this wild plant, and even greater surprise upon the serenity and rapture of their faces.

When Mama Torres saw him coming, she broke off a bit of tuber and handed it to the good Padre, indicating that he should eat it. For the sake of his work and his success among his children, the Padre Tomás had endured many things. He showed no hesitancy of eating this acrid and bitter root if that was needed to regain their confidence.

Standing there with the black earth torn up about his feet, at the doorway of the hut, suddenly Padre Tomás felt as though the choir of Heaven itself burst into rapture in his head.

This time there was more than a hundred plants. Padre Tomás stayed and helped until the last was safely back in the good earth.

When he found that he also wished no more food until the following day, he came back to the house of Torres and instructed them, "Guard them with care, my children."

They had saved a few loose tubers and they gave him a share. He took them back to the mission and planted them.

When Pepe was of the years eight, there were a thousand plants. By the time he was nine there were ten thousand plants spread over all the village. Now there was peace and prosperity in the village. No man's hand was raised against his brother. Even the chickens, the pigs and the dogs received good care.

Long since, Padre Tomás had sent tubers of the plant to other villages and missions. Before very long all of Guatemala was eating regularly of the dahlia.

It had been well known to everyone that the military was carefully plotting the overthrow of el Presidente, *mañana*, and some day they might even be moved to do so. So well along was the plot that another plot back of that was formed to overthrow that dictatorship in its turn.

Now one by one the leaders of the revolution, and the second revolution, found they preferred to cultivate their gardens of the dahlia. They found they preferred to spend long hours and many successful conferences with one another in determining new ways by which they could save money for the taxed, even to send the soldiers to help the citizens in peaceful pursuits.

The politicians stopped robbing the treasury and sending monies to banks in foreign lands to live in luxury after the revolutions they engineered to give them excuse to leave the country had succeeded. They began to build of the schools and roads for the people instead.

In all Guatemala there was no unhappiness, no laziness, no evil. Every day was as fiesta, for fiesta was most of all the time for enjoyment. What greater enjoyment could there be than that of growing the dahlia? Each day the market place must be piled high with the tubers so that every city dweller might receive his share of the miracle food.

And the market place was constantly filled with tourists as from all the world who bought of the plant to send to their homes and friends for the growing there.

As everywhere, at the embassies at Guatemala City there had been the endless game of spying and counterspying. No Norte Americano business man made a move but what a counter move was made by the English counterpart. Every Hindu watched a Moslem, and every Moslem watched a Hindu. Even Wun Sing Low, laundryman for twenty years, was now known to be a Red spy, sending out his messages by marks upon the shirts of business men. All were enemies to the Soviet, and that embassy chose to see a world threat in the blink of every peon's eyes.

The governments of the world were accustomed to the voluminous reports, and they sifted through them with yawns of boredom. A man's diplomatic worth was judged by the poundage of his reports and the frequency of the crises he might uncover. Even so, it took some time before the governments became aware of the cessation of such reports from Guatemala.

Peace and prosperity and good will permeated all the reports from all the spy headquarters. No man could believe

ill of his neighbor, for no man could partake of evil, or evil thought, where the dahlia was to be eaten.

Moscow, ever wary in its inferiority complex, and never ceasing to jockey for position, was the first of the capitals to summon its embassy's return. It demanded an account of these un-Marxian reports of serenity and peace in a capitalistic country. It wished to know why if there was no indigenous trouble some had not been manufactured.

The embassy took with it a plentiful supply of the tubers of the dahlia and ate heavily of them. It had been learned that the human body could store the food value of the dahlia for months and they were taking no chances. Throughout the routine of their torture, they maintained their rapture. Finally their inquisitors had no course left but to taste of the dahlia itself to check these fantastic tales and so give the lie to the diplomats.

Then the inquisitors in turn must endure the torture, for they no longer wished to carry forth their duties, and in turn their questioners ate. It became that there were none left but the Politbureau itself to carry on the torture since there were none others to be trusted to carry out the true democratic blessings upon their fellow men.

So it came about that one by one the members of the Politbureau tasted of the dahlia, even to the leader himself.

All of this took much time, and meanwhile the heads of other nations who were not so suspicious of every shadow, and not so inaccessible, were eating regularly of the dahlia.

When finally the sincere word of peace and good will came ringing from Moscow to all the world, it was echoed back with all sincerity.

By the end of twelve years over all the world the dahlia grew and thrived and was eaten. The Bering Strait Eskimo, the Congo Pigmy, the Australian Bushman, the Tibetan yak herder, each had his carefully bred offshoot of the dahlia. For the first time within written history the wretched masses of India and the famine-accustomed Chinese knew the full belly and peace and progress.

So it became in the world. There was but good will and happiness for all.

Pepe was now seventeen, and well beyond the age to marry. But there was not the economic urgency there once had been and children were permitted to remain without so much responsibility a little longer.

But today he was seventeen and today was his wedding day. Today was a most important day and he would not be called Pepe. He would be called for this one day by his true name of Juan Rafael de la Medina Torres. Now he was a grown man and his village was prosperous and everyone was happy.

Dimly he was aware that there was a world beyond his own village. But like all his forebears it had no reality for him. In truth he still knew only the path leading down the side of the volcano to the village; or the path up the mountain to where they once had grown corn and beans and now grew

dahlias; or the path around the volcano and down to the coffee finca.

Barefoot still, but with his finest knee britches striped like peppermint candy, with his red cummerbund wrapped around his slender waist, he trotted down the path toward the mission where Maria waited and where the good Padre Tomás would make them as one person. This was his world.

Half walking, half running in eagerness, the sight of the particular glade where he had first found the dahlia recalled his memory of himself as a little boy.

He laughed joyously and threw his shoulders back and breathed the mountain air of the morning in ecstasy. "What a one I was," he called aloud and shouted again with laughter. "I remember I was so fierce in those days. Why, I was going to conquer all the world!"

[The end of *The Conqueror* by Mark Clifton]