

Descendant of Cortez the Conqueror, SHE HAS to BEG FOR a LIVING

By Lillian Zahn

A TRAGIC story that runs back through four centuries weaves itself today around the person of an obscure beggar woman on the streets of Mexico City.

A lineal descendant of Hernando Cortez, conqueror of Mexico, and his native Indian mistress, the Marina of the Sixteenth Century, the present day Marina, of the Twentieth Century, pleads for coins in the land that her ancestors wrested from the Aztecs and dominated for years, partaking of its immense wealth and other innumerable treasures.

Resembling her illustrious ancestors to a marked degree, the impoverished Marina of today does not feel disgraced by her supplications. In spite of the fact that no legal papers were bequeathed her in a country that has been torn by internecine strife almost since its founding her intimate knowledge of her descent convinces the skeptics of the authenticity of her claims.

With a sombrero on her head and sometimes a ragged urchin on her knee Marina may be found seated on the steps in front of an ancient church in the old quarters of Mexico City where each house, even each door, carries markings that link it indissolubly to the grandeur of Old Spain.

Her finely cut features and hands, browned by long exposure to the tropical rays of the sun, belie purely peasant ancestry. Lustrous brown eyes of arresting beauty impress the on-looker forcibly. Even in the rags that indicate her profession, she has something majestic about her.

Marina tells her story in a monosyllabic tone that is almost a litany. One is startled the first time he hears a woman in rags chanting: "I am a descendant of Cortez. Please give me alms, for it will bring you good luck."

TO trace the noble blood lines that run through this Mexican mendicant, and find the reasons for her present plight, we have to turn back the pages of history to the Sixteenth Century and the arrival of Hernando Cortez in Mexico.

Subject to constant attack and cordially hated by several large tribes, including the refined but barbarous Aztecs, Cortez met many sharp reverses and had bitter hours of despair. In negotiating with the Indians, allaying their suspicions and also detecting conspiracies for sudden uprisings and ambushes, Cortez learned to rely solely on Marina who, although the daughter of a chieftain, was given to him as a slave.

Conversant with all the Indian dialects, Marina could, in the role of an interpreter, imbue the Indians with respect for the Spaniards and also engender a more tolerant attitude among the Castilian invaders for the "ignorant savages" they wanted to put under control.

On being given to Cortez, Marina had already suffered from the sorrow and teachery that were to mar her life from beginning to end.

She was born at Painalla in the Province of Coatzacoalco, on the southeastern part of the Mexican Empire.



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quite faded from her memory.

Small wonder, then, that she hailed Cortez and his bearded Spaniards as saviours sent by the plumed serpent to stamp out the brutal sacrifice of 20,000 adolescents yearly in revoltingly sordid, beastly rituals. Once under the Spanish leader's kind protection, she turned all information over to him.

No matter where Cortez and his men roamed Marina was the eagle eye of the army. She had an uncanny insight into the secret plotting and planning of rebellious tribes encountered along the line of march, and the guard of the Spanish garrison would be doubled the minute she suspected trouble.

As a result of the union with Cortez, Marina bore a son, Don Martin Cortez, from whom the present Marina is descended.

Some of the Mexicans today, whether of Indian or direct Castilian descent, regard Marina and her descendants with awe and admiration.

Her gentle virtues are extolled in many songs and ballads made the more pathetic by the fact that when Cortez's legal wife joined him, he coldly gave Marina to a Castilian knight, Don Juan Xaramillo, in the course of an expedition to Honduras, and thus rid himself of an embarrassing situation.

The wealth Cortez had accumulated was left to his legitimate son Don Martin, but Marina's descendants, because of her concubinage, did not share in more than a small portion of the estate—which is undoubtedly why one of them is begging in Mexico City, although her blood entitles her to the same high Castilian honors that were given the legitimate descendants.



The Marina of today, begging with a young girl borrowed from the Beggars' Guild of Mexico City.

Her father, a rich and powerful chief, died when she was very young. Marina's mother, an unscrupulous woman, married again; having a son, she conceived the infamous idea of securing to this offspring of her second union her beautiful daughter's rightful inheritance.

Using the body of a servant's deceased child, she announced that Marina was dead and secretly delivered her into the hands of some itinerant traders. Marina was subsequently sold by the merchants to the Chief of Tabasco who, in turn, presented her to the Spaniards. During this time she learned to speak all the Indian dialects eloquently; a little later she

learned to converse fluently in Spanish.

On meeting the powerful chief, Aguilar, Cortez found Marina to be indispensable in staving off immediate hostilities. First he made her his official interpreter, next his secretary and ultimately, captivated by her charms, his mistress.

MARINA's service to and love for Cortez in some ways indicate a desertion of her people, but the shift in her allegiance was thoroughly justified. A descendant of the Toltecs, who ruled Mexico before the Aztecs came into power, she hated Aztec conquerors for their brutality and blood-lust.

As a child she had been compelled to assist in all sorts of human sacrifices. She had watched the priests as they tortured human beings before throwing them down from the top of the temple into a tank filled with crocodiles and serpents, and the agonized cries of the dying victims never

