

Meena: Heroine Of Afghanistan

Melody Ermachild Chavis

Chapter 1

A GIRL BETWEEN THE OLD WORLD AND THE NEW

Meena lay on the toshak, the big cushion on the floor of her family's sleeping room, only half-conscious of her mother's hands stroking her thick dark hair. Her father, too, knelt beside her on the ruby red carpet, bathing her hot face with a cool, wet cloth. Her fever had reached 105 degrees. She was drenched in sweat, but she shivered as if she were freezing. It was a hot day, yet she could not get warm no matter how many quilts her mother placed over her.

Meena's brothers and sisters took turns peering anxiously from the doorway. Meena moaned and tried to turn over. The younger children could hardly believe that the thin form, lying almost invisible under the thick pile of quilts, was their big sister Meena. She was usually lively and talkative. She was rebellious, too, and ran and screamed with them and made as much noise as she could until their parents told her to be quiet. Sometimes, she was so opinionated and even bossy, that she seemed like their second mother. Now she was so weak that she looked younger than her twelve years.

Meena knew her illness must be very contagious, because her little sisters and brothers were not allowed to come into the room. She longed to hug them and feel their sweet little bodies close to hers. Usually in the summer, the sleeping cushions were moved outside into the courtyard, where the whole family enjoyed sleeping together under a big summer tent of mosquito netting. But now Meena lay inside, with only her frantic parents nearby.

Her father had named her Meena, the Farsi word for 'Light.' He often said, 'She is the light of my life,' and he loved to call her 'my heart.' From the time she was born, she had been his special child, intelligent and sweet-natured, and he had wanted the best for her. Meena's whole family had loved her mischievous smile and her easy laugh. And they all remarked on her bright eyes, black as coal. Now her eyes were closed, and her round cheeks were hot and dry to the touch.

Meena had fallen ill a week before. At first she had been sick to her stomach and lost her appetite. Meal after meal she took only a few small bites of her mother's naan - the big flat loaves of unleavened bread Meena usually loved. Then the morning came when Meena could not get out of bed. Crying, she told her mother that she saw white spots - pieces of light that got larger until she could no longer see. Then she fainted. Now, she was not speaking at all.

Because Meena's father, Latif, was an architect, often employed by the government of the Afghan king, her family had enough money to send for a doctor. The diagnosis was typhoid fever, common in Afghanistan in 1969. At least one-fourth of the victims died. Even in their city of Kabul, drinking water was not always safe, typhoid was common, and medicines were scarce.

If Meena had lived in Europe, she would have been in a modern hospital, hooked to an intravenous tube delivering antibiotics to her fevered body. Had she lived out in the Afghan countryside far from the capital, she probably would have died without any treatment at all.

At twelve, Meena was old enough to realize, after the doctor's visit, that she might not recover. Her mother's tears and her father's sad face told her so. Meena had known other children who had died of diseases, even some in her large extended family. As she slipped into unconsciousness, she wondered if she were dying, but she felt too weak and cold to resist.

She had been born at home, in 1957, in this very room. When the Muslim priest, the Mullah, came to bless her birth, he pronounced: 'She will be a queen, but she will not live to old age.' The Mullah's words seemed to doom her now.

Suddenly, Meena went rigid. Her chin trembled, and her face contorted. Her spine arched off the cushions, and her head jerked back. She was having a seizure caused by her fever.

There was nothing Meena's parents could do except hold and stroke her. It subsided a minute later. Her parents were terrified that even if she lived, the seizures might permanently damage her brain. The loss of Meena's sparkling intelligence would be a tragedy they would not be able to bear.

As a baby, she had talked even before she had walked. Once she learned to talk, her parents often joked, she had never stopped. Her favorite thing was to follow adults around, asking them questions. She learned to read easily, and had done so well in school that she had passed the exams for entry into the best high school for girls in Afghanistan. She was to have the rarest gift for an Afghan girl: an excellent education.

Now, her parents waited through the night, sitting anxiously beside her, hoping the medicine prescribed by the doctor would work. They had to face the possibility that perhaps their Meena was among the unluckiest Afghan children after all - one of the countless youngsters who died before anyone knew what they might do with their lives. Meena lay still, barely seeming to breathe.

At last, toward morning, Meena's fever broke. The danger passed, but she was left so weak she could not walk. At first, light from the window was too bright for her eyes. She slept for days in the darkened room, hardly believing that she was still alive. The ordinary sounds of her neighborhood - the squeaking wheels of wooden hand carts called karachis, the clopping of horses' feet in the street outside, the engines of cars and buses passing, the talk and laughter of the neighbors in their courtyards - pierced her ears. Only the songs of the birds in her family's fruit trees comforted her.

Meena's father carried her to a chair outside, where she could see the high folded peaks of the mountains rising above the Kabul River. Meena usually loved to go out into the busy city. Now she wanted only to stay behind the walls that enclosed her family's home and gaze quietly at the grey-and-purple mountains that sometimes seemed close enough to touch.

Meena's father, Latif, came from a family who had lived in the city of Kabul for two generations. Their home was in an old hillside neighborhood called Kartai-Parwan, where families lived who were neither rich nor poor. Many were teachers, government workers, or professionals like Latif. He had gone to Istiqlal High School in Kabul and then to technical college, where he studied architecture. He designed government buildings, and also private homes. Latif was clever and resourceful. He was famous in the family for being able to build or fix anything. He loved maps, and he also worked on preparing official maps of Afghanistan.

Meena's people were ethnic Pashtuns, the majority group in Afghanistan, and the tribe of the kings who had ruled the nation for more than two hundred years. Meena's strong features - her definite forehead, nose, and chin, and her dark eyes and hair - are typical Pashtun physical traits, easily recognized among the many tribes of Afghanistan.

For all of Meena's twelve years, Afghanistan had been at peace. Her country was a place where diverse peoples lived side by side in relative harmony, and hardship. To Afghans, hospitality is the highest duty. Even starving villagers, facing famine brought on by poor crops, would offer guests a bowl of hot boiled grass, even if that was all they had to eat.

Meena's family, like their neighbors, lived in privacy inside their enclosed compound. High brown mud or stone walls lined the narrow dusty streets in their part of the city. Behind the walls, families lived in an intimate world of their own. The family had several common rooms for living. There were separate cooking and laundry rooms and storehouses for supplies, all arranged around the central courtyard with trees and plants. Nearly all city families kept chickens, and some even had goats. Well-off families also had rooms for servants. No one had individual private rooms, and each member of the family had only a few personal possessions.

At mealtime, Meena and the other children were told, 'Go and wash your hands.' Then everyone gathered around a colorful destarkhan, a cloth spread on the floor. They sat close together, using their hands and pieces of naan to scoop rice mixed with nuts and raisins and pieces of roasted chicken from big bowls. Everyone watched what Meena ate, and tried to tempt her to eat more, hoping she would gain back some of the weight she had lost while she was sick. Meena's family of ten children was not at all unusual in Kabul. Often, aunts, uncles, and cousins were seated around the destarkhan also. Everyone talked and laughed, and at Meena's favorite times, the robab would come out, a stringed instrument, and small drums, and everyone would sing. Usually, Meena hated to go to bed. She loved to be allowed to lie down near the grown-ups and fall asleep listening to their talk and laughter. But after she had been sick with typhoid, she fell asleep right away.

At night, the toshak cushions along the walls were pulled out into the middle of the rooms and became the family's beds, where they slept side by side. Family members enjoyed being together, and hardly anyone was ever alone.

The women in Afghan families spent most of their time with each other. Each morning and evening, women carrying bundles walked in groups to the hamom, the neighborhood baths, where water for washing was heated communally. There the women bathed together and had a chance to visit. The women's support for each other was so essential to their lives that a woman without her mother, mother-in-law, sisters, aunts, and female cousins living close by was very much pitied.

Afghan tradition required modesty in women. Meena's mothers and aunts wore long skirts and scarves covering their hair when they went out, as most Kabul women did. A guest room near the front door of each house allowed the men of the house to entertain male visitors. This left the inner rooms free for the women to live without fear of being seen by men who were not relatives.

The lives of women in the countryside were harsher and more restricted than in the cities. In the most traditional and religious villages, most women wore a head-to-toe covering - a burqa, which covers the face and forces the wearer to try to see where she is going through a mesh over the eyes. The burqa was becoming less popular when Meena was a girl. Women seen wearing it in the city were assumed to be visiting from the countryside.

Most city families had relatives in rural villages, where they returned for important occasions like weddings and funerals. Much of the food city people ate came from the farms of their country relatives. Over centuries, Afghan farmers had learned how to grow wheat in the dry, thin soil of the fragile mountain valleys, watered by rainfall or streams. At lower, warmer elevations, rice was grown in emerald green paddies. Lower still, people kept camels that grazed among date palm trees. Families of nomads roamed hundreds of miles across the countryside, herding sheep and goats. Villagers used the wool of their animals to weave carpets. This was the ancient Afghan culture that had persisted unaltered for centuries. The fact that it resisted change was both its beauty and its curse.

When Meena's family traveled to visit their relatives, she often saw people who were too poor even to afford a draft animal to help them plow the fields. It was a common sight to see a man behind a plow, wrestling the wooden handles, pushing the blade through the tough ground, while the woman walked in front, bent over, pulling the plow forward with a rope - a technology thousands of years old.

The vast majority of Afghan men and women were illiterate farmers who did hard labor in the fields. Life went along as it had for centuries, not only because of the lack

of modern technology, but because the wisdom of the past had ensured the tenuous survival of people. To peasants, it was obvious that science did not bring food; they depended on God's grace to send rainfall to water the crops in this harsh and fragile land.

On buses crossing the countryside, men were given the seats inside. Women rode on top of the bus, clinging to the baggage, even in burning hot sun, rain, or blowing dust. Meena once saw a bus stopped along the roadside with a desperately ill woman lying on the baggage. Her husband was handing tea and bread up to her, but she was too weak to take it. She was trying to get to Kabul, where there was a hospital and medicines.

Meena started to cry. 'What is the matter?' her mother, Hanifa, asked her.

'Why does she have to ride in the heat?' Meena asked through her tears. 'She's so sick. Why can't she ride inside?'

'Come here, Meena,' her mother said, taking her onto her lap and patting her. 'I know it's terrible,' Hanifa said, 'but there's nothing we can do.'

Quietly and sadly she added, 'It's probably the least of what she has to suffer.'

In old-fashioned village families, men were valued so much more than women that the birth of a baby girl was greeted with sorrow. Mothers of newborn girls were offered sympathy if they were lucky; unlucky ones were blamed and even divorced.

Though they lived in the city, Meena's family had strong ties to village traditions. Her grandmother, mother, and aunts lived with those ancient rules. The fact that they could not read hardly mattered. A woman like Meena's mother, Hanifa, an accomplished mother of ten, knew all she needed to know - according to tradition - to run her household. She knew many prayers and poems by heart, but she would never read a newspaper or a book. It was not unusual in Afghanistan for an educated man like Latif to be married to a woman who, like Hanifa, had never gone to school. Hanifa was an intelligent woman who was interested in the modern world. Though

she could not read herself, she wanted her daughters to be as well educated as her sons, and Meena's father, Latif, agreed.

Meena's greatest encouragement to study and think about the larger world came from her mother's mother. She was an intelligent woman with strong opinions. The two were so close that Meena usually slept curled up beside the elderly woman, whose love helped Meena to grow into a confident and optimistic girl.

In Afghan tradition, many men had more than one wife. Muslim law allows up to four. This custom was dying out among urban families, but many still followed the third ways. Latif's first wife was the mother of Meena's two teenage brothers. Latif had then married his second wife, Hanifa. Meena was the oldest of Hanifa's children, and the oldest girl in the family. Between them, Latif's two wives had ten children.

Meena loved both her mother and her stepmother very much, having known them both all her life. She admired her mothers for the way they loved all of their children and cared for their home together to make it a happy place for everyone. People said they could hardly tell which one was Meena's real mother because Meena was so close to both of them.

To help her recover from typhoid, Meena's mothers brought her pomegranates to eat, red jewel-like fruits that came from the fertile valleys outside Kabul. Their lumpy oval shape reminded Meena of the map of Afghanistan, called 'The Heart of Asia.' Slowly, she gained strength.

Recuperating from typhoid fever in her family home, Meena was surrounded by the close circle of her parents and brothers and sisters. She also was a member of a much larger extended family. Her many aunts, uncles, and cousins thought of her not as Meena, one little girl, but Meena, descended from generations of Afghans and born into the place where she belonged, part of a clan with its own passed-down stories and traditions. The most favored marriages for Afghans were between cousins. This meant that the big clanlike families curled in on themselves, with many members sharing grandparents and great-grandparents, so that ties were very close. The big family provided security for everyone in it - if people died or were ill, if they needed money or food, each member could turn to the others for help.

The sound of the voice of the azzan, the priest at the mosque, calling the faithful to prayer five times a day, sounded to Meena like a gentle call back to life. Islam was like a familiar embrace to her.

There are as many forms of Islam as there are nations and peoples who practice it. For the majority of Afghans, religion was a soft thread in the fabric of life. The calls to prayer were part of each day's rhythm; people stopped to pray, or not, as they wished. The Mullahs - priests who ran the mosques and taught in the religious schools, had influence, but they were not the government. Islam was so much a part of life in Afghanistan that it was like the air. It so permeated everything that it was almost invisible.

As she gradually realized that she would live, Meena wondered why. She was a romantic and earnest person. To her, it seemed that her life must have been spared for some purpose greater than the ordinary fate of an Afghan girl. Meena had already done something neither her mother nor her grandmother had done: She had gone to school. She was part of a new generation of young women, unlike any that Afghanistan had ever seen.

In some ways, Afghanistan was just entering the age of print. Books and newspapers were common only in the cities. In the villages, news was brought by word of mouth, and storytelling was the entertainment. Afghan culture was an oral tradition, in which poetry, songs, and stories were passed down through generations and valued more than books. Only about 10 percent of Afghans were able to read and write.

Meena had loved school from the start. She was such a good student that her parents wanted her to go to Kabul University. She could take up a career among the small but growing group of professional Afghan women who practiced medicine and law and taught school. Meena was poised at the edge of a new world. Yet her future was uncertain because the old world exerted its strong pull on her.

At twelve, Meena was already at an age when many Afghan girls had their marriages arranged. Most girls still married young and left school before they finished. As the oldest girl in a family of ten children, Meena knew what housework was. As soon as she was big enough, one of her mothers would say, 'Meena, the baby is crying. Go and pick him up.' Meena helped to pat out the bread dough before school, and she swept the courtyard when she got home in the afternoons. Meena was a good eldest daughter and big sister. She learned to put the needs of the five younger children ahead of her own. She was so responsible that she learned to offer

them food, or change their diapers, or pick them up and rock them even before they began to cry.

But sometimes Meena felt she would rather die than spend her life confined in the house like her mothers and her grandmother. There had to be more to life than preparing meals, cleaning, and answering the endless demands of children. She was determined to do something more with her life. She wanted to have the same chances as her brothers to have a career, to see other places, to have people listen to her ideas.

Reading was Meena's way of escaping and of dreaming of the future she hoped to have. She spent the weeks when she was still too weak to go to school dozing in the shade and reading. Her favorite novels were by the American adventurer and rebel Jack London, whose books had been translated into many languages, including Farsi. London wrote about the wretched lives of slaves and poor workers. He exposed the cruelty of plantation overseers and factory owners in the early years of capitalism. His novels about injustice and his exciting adventure stories were enormously popular in Afghanistan. Engrossed in *The Call of the Wild*, Meena was no longer in Kabul, but in faraway Alaska. She longed to see the world, but it seemed to her that only men were allowed to have adventures like Jack London's heroes, mushing across the tundra, sailing the stormy seas, and fighting for justice.

Typhoid fever changed Meena. She never regained her full strength. Her legs ached when she got cold, or if she walked too far. Worst of all, she was left with epilepsy. When she became too tired or upset, she sometimes collapsed in a seizure like the one she had at the height of her fever.

Meena's illness had changed her in other ways, too. The first twelve years of her life had been filled with love. She was a beautiful girl with striking features: large black eyes framed by arched brows, a high forehead and strong chin defining her sweet, rounded face, and thick, long dark hair. Everyone who looked at her smiled, and she had smiled back at the world. Her grandmother and her aunts and uncles had always spoiled her with little gifts and treats. When her favorite uncle came to visit she would run to him, and demand, 'What do you have for me in your pockets?' as he scooped her up in a big hug.

Now, she was a more serious person, changed from a little girl to a young woman in the space of a few desperate weeks fighting for her life. She had a new look in her eyes, as if a slight shadow had fallen across her gaze. As strength gradually flowed back into her body, so did a resolve to use her second chance at life for a purpose larger than herself.