

The news broke upon him with all the suddenness of a monsoon thunderstorm. He was alternately bewildered, angry, confused, and also glad.

“ I don’t believe it!” said Sharmaji. “ You mean Rukmini – our Rukmini, and Robert, Robert Todd are going to get married? How do you know, and why was I not told before? Why am I always the last person to be told anything? Am I just nobody? I can’t believe it, and I won’t till they tell me personally!”

A few minutes later Robert entered his unit, accompanied by Rukmini, to join Abraham the bearer of ill-good news. Her silky, dusky cheeks were blushing darkly, and her eyes sparkled as she looked at Robert.

“ Sharmaji! You can throw me out on my ear if you like, but I have come to ask your permission – *your permission*, Sharmaji – to marry Rukmini,” said Robert in his shy, open way.

Sharmaji had pulled himself together. He ran out from behind the table, embraced and kissed Robert on the cheek, and saluted Rukmini with equal fondness. This was the happiest day of his life, he announced frankly, everything was to be left to him, it would be a grand wedding, people would remember it for the rest of their lives, Rukmini was a blessed girl, he knew it the moment he had set eyes on her, and Robert, Robert was the luckiest man, ~~there was so much work to be done. He had to get the wedding arranged in a manner that would have done credit to any man.~~

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As he said himself there were a million things to be done. A SERVICE staff meeting was called, a critical path chalked out, and duties apportioned. While the couple had said they would prefer a Hindu wedding, Sharmaji insisted it should be followed by a Christian wedding, as was only fit and proper, in the Wesley Church. He would arrange everything with his friend, the pastor. The church choir must be rehearsed, and Abraham, as the Christian on the committee, must see to it. Gandhiji, said Sharmaji with his customary respectful pause at the name, had liked ‘Lead Kindly Light,’ and this must be sung. The marriage *pandal* of the *mutt* premises was the obvious choice for the ‘Hindu’ wedding. After much debate, it was unanimously decided that since the elite of the city and ‘government’ were to be invited for the ‘wedding of the season,’ the rural centre was ruled out as a venue for the reception. All the events must take place in the city, but where? was the key question.

The choice of venues stretched from Sharmaji’s own neighbourhood – as that would be ‘homely,’ the bride being almost a ‘daughter of the house,’ a statement that raised many discrete eyebrows, and not so discrete smiles hidden behind sari *paloos* – to the Raj Bhavan itself, since Sharmaji was a known friend of the Governor’s, who patronized NGOs in general, and SERVICE it particular. Ultimately, the Botanical Gardens were accorded the great honour of hosting the Reception, since the Horticultural Society in any case was a partner in providing planting material for the ‘Green’ SERVICE programme. Venkat would be Reception in charge, but keeping Sharmaji informed of every move first