

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, he could see their children being the light of the world, Abraham, there was so much work to be done, and what were their plans? and so on, in a bustling manner that would have done credit to Jane Austen’s Mrs. Bennett.

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

thing every morning. Three busloads would bring women from all the villages to the reception, and Dasgupta was to oversee all transport arrangements, including decking the 'bride's car,' their society's SUV, with roses, and hiring special taxis for the city's notables.

After much discussion with the pastor of the church and the priests of the temple, Sharmaji reluctantly agreed to the church wedding being performed first – though by rights the girl's religion should have had primacy. What clinched the issue for Sharmaji was the appetizing prospect that straight after the 'hindu' ceremony they could all partake of a chaste lunch, cooked on the temple premises in the traditional manner. Many times in the past several months he had been tempted to offer a special *puja* at the temple, to be followed by a lunch at the temple, but had desisted for fear that the Gods might take umbrage at his insincerity. But a marriage was a fitting occasion, especially so, since Robert, a foreign 'outcaste,' would be given Gods' grace for once in his life.

Organizing the menu for the reception was an altogether tougher proposition, since the elite would be coming, Muslims and government officials, and press people, whose friendship he could cement during the evening. It went without saying that a bar must be kept open during the function. But someone had to keep a watchful eye open, on it and the servants, otherwise he would be beggared. Of course, all expenses would be met out of the society's funds, but even then, he could always find good uses for money saved. After worrying at length, he decided that no one in the staff could be trusted, and that he had no option but to ask his brother-in-law to take charge of the bar. Of course that fellow would take advantage of his helplessness by offering free drinks to all his cronies, but that was a better option than to let any one of his staff loose on the drinks.

Sharmaji decided he would take personal charge of ordering the food. He prided himself on his epicurean tastes. He would meld Andhra dishes with Hyderabadi cuisine – each dish should be a delight on its own, and yet no more than one organic highlight among many of a gastronomic evening that would be remembered by all. He was pleased with this fancy, with himself, and even Rukmini, for enabling him to be the 'giver of food' to all, and what food it would be! He threw himself into organizing the food with an enthusiasm he had not felt for anything else in a long time. Clearly no single cook could be entrusted with the whole menu, but different experts must be called in for preparing the dishes that had brought them special renown.

His wife had sniffed at his enthusiasm, remarking pointedly that his own daughter's wedding had been a shabby affair, while he was now making a fool of himself over this other woman. He had snapped back that they were not spending a rupee of their own money, and that this was a business occasion when he could please so many important people. Her eyes had widened at this new perspective, and she had said no more, but showed her displeasure in the way she banged down his coffee cup every time. As he needed her help, he decided to overlook her ill temper.

“ Look, all the secretaries to government will be there, from the chief secretary downwards,” he told her one evening. “ They are almost all North Indians who have

never had a chance to eat proper food, our food. You must conduct them to the Andhra table and show them how to eat, how to appreciate every dish. No one can do it better than you. We must buy a silk sari for the evening. We will do it this week. Now we must get the best cooks – you know them better than anyone else, since you yourself are the best cook.”

She was not impervious to this praise. She smiled, sat down, and they amicably discussed dishes, cooks, special vessels to be borrowed, and who had them. “What you need to do is engage Kamamma,” she said after due deliberation. “My mother learnt cooking from her, but she fusses all the time, and she hates to come to the city. But I know she needs money. Her son is an IT engineer and he has the offer of a good job in California, but he has to pay for his own ticket, so she will cook, but you must send a car to fetch her.”

Kamamma when she arrived turned out to be a very large woman, very unsteady on her legs, but with a commanding voice all the same. Refusing to sit on a chair, she lowered herself groaning on to the floor of their flat, and ordered Sharmaji’s wife to get her some hot coffee and a few soft *idlis* if she had any. Sharmaji was amazed to see his wife being obsequious, which she had never been before, even on their wedding day, even to his own aunt. After half an hour had passed, during which the women exchanged many stories about distant relatives, and cures for constant aches and other disorders, Kamamma turned to Sharmaji who had sat by patiently ignored, and told him that she and her three assistants, no more than boys really, would stay at the temple, she could not stand dirty city apartments, but next morning he was to come with them to buy provisions.

The shopping expedition stretched over four days, with Kamamma negotiating the crowded narrow lanes with surprising agility, though she never ceased to complain of the city, its filth, and her own ailments, which had brought her to death’s door. She rested her large, panting self on narrow ledges or stools by the door of shops, and held long animated conversations with the shopkeepers. They all seemed to agree readily with her that the vegetables, or oil, or grain, on display were not of the fastidious quality to which she was accustomed, and some blamed it on the government and its policies, some on the present generation, and a few on the Iraq war. Sharmaji tagged along, disgorging money whenever she declared herself reconciled to the choice available, vainly wishing he could be sitting in his cloistered office, under his fan, waiting for tiffin. But he was determined the feast at the reception would be such as would be remembered in fable and in song, and so he soldiered on.

Kamamma was pleased that he had danced attendance for four days without complaining. There were not very many husbands like that she reminded his wife, who should count herself lucky. Sharmaji was amazed to see his wife blushing demurely, and coyly glancing at him, as if to hint of other services he performed to her satisfaction. Upon being told he would no longer be needed to accompany them to the shops, he organized a taxi for them, gave his wife all the money she demanded, and hurried off to consult his good friend, Wajid Hussain, about the Hyderabad section of the menu.

He entered his friend's gate, tucked away unobtrusively in the corner of a mean little street, and crossing a wide courtyard overrun with children, puddles, and chicken, climbed a few shallow stone steps to the deep verandah, where Wajid sat in an armchair, fanning himself. His friend would hear of nothing till he had had a cup of tea and tasted the sweets made just that morning. Wajid and he had been at school together, and smoked their first cigarette together at the Palace Theatre's matinee show, so he started straight away telling Wajid to get off his armchair and find him the best Hyderabad cook there was, and why he needed one, and how important the party would be. Wajid heard him out languidly, and then seemed to sink into sleep. Sharmaji waited patiently, knowing the great mind was working.

"You need Afzal *mian* if he is at all free that evening," said Wajid with deliberation. "We will go and see him, but after lunch. You never come home these days, so I must insist. Then, we will start up my old Austin 8, I haven't taken her out for a spin in a long time, and this could be a perfect afternoon." Sharmaji knew nothing could induce Wajid to change his plans once his mind was made up, so after a leisurely lunch, which he enjoyed, and tinkering for half-an-hour with the carburetor of the old car, which he didn't, they set off to the other end of town, proudly honking their brass horn. They were received with ceremony at Afzal *mian*'s place, a long low structure which combined a large cookhouse, a small neat frontal office, and residential quarters at the back.

Afzal *mian* did much consulting of his diary, shouted at sundry young assistants to fetch him his 'order book,' used two of his cell-phones to apologize to various customers that despite his earlier promises he would not be able to cater for their parties, what could he do, his hands were tied by honour, and life would be meaningless without loyalty. After thirty minutes spent assuring them that he would help make alternative arrangements, Afzal *mian* turned to Wajid and said, *bhai sahib*, see what trouble he was creating for his old friend?

Wajid took all this with equanimity. "*Arre bhai*, what are friends for if not to give trouble?" he asked. "If you have a dish of your excellent *qubanni* I would like it very much now." Afzal *mian* hurriedly shouted orders, and a dish of sweet *qubanni* with thick cream and apricot nuts was served up to both of them in old porcelain dishes. Contentment reigned for a while, and then Wajid and Afzal *mian* put their heads together to design the menu. It was immediately agreed that chicken in *biryani* was a modern abomination, and not to be thought of, but Afzal *mian* said dejectedly that the market did not have the quality of rice he used for his *biryanis*. When Sharmaji intervened to suggest that he could have some *basmati* sent down from Punjab, they looked at him in silent disdain, Wajid explaining that that sort had no real fragrance, the secret of good *biryani*. After more phone calls, Afzal felt somewhat comforted that loyal friends might send some special rice from Karimnagar in time for the feast. While Wajid knew of a man who could be depended upon to sell them good quality dried fruits, there was no hope of genuine saffron being available anywhere, so certain dishes were ruthlessly eliminated.

Before they left Afzal *mian*'s place, Wajid asked him to give them his best price. Afzal *mian* objected. He could not charge anything; this was between friends, it would be like a

function in his own house. After much haggling, it was agreed that Afzal *mian* will charge something – not fees – that was impossible, but something to cover the minor expenses of his assistants. Since he had several assistants, Sharmaji was sure it would be a large bill, but thankfully not exorbitant.

As the preparations progressed, Sharmaji found he was working with an energy that surprised himself. He went to bed planning, leapt out of it before anyone else was about, organized the day meticulously as he had never done before. His exhilaration grew with the successful operation of every step, this was one ‘project’ that would really happen, for which he would not have to write a long report why things went wrong. He was exhausted, but triumphant. On the eve of the wedding, he was tense and relaxed in turns, like some Napoleon, who had scrupulously planned a victory and waited only for his forces to carry out his vision. On the day itself there was nothing further for him to do but savour the accolades that would be showered upon him, but he was too tired and dazed, even to do justice to the meals he had planned with such anticipation.

After all the guests had left late that evening, and Robert had pumped his hand one last time, and Rukmini had kissed him on the cheek, he was all alone with himself. For once in his life he had done something from which he derived no benefit at all, but all the same he was happy.