



CHAPTER ONE

**The Bet at the Banquet**

“**W**e’ve known each other for a good many years, Mr. Kovács. As a successful businessman and the owner of several factories, you are a bit of a celebrity here in Hungary. People like you live very well, you can afford anything that takes your fancy. You don’t have any financial worries and are as free as a bird. You can go on holiday to wherever you want and for as long as you want. If you wanted to, you could spend all your time traveling round the world. You could certainly afford it. Meanwhile, somebody would take care of your business for you while you were away.”

“Well, Ambassador, you’ve painted a pretty rosy picture of my life but I’m as vulnerable as the next guy. I could be knocked off my feet by a sudden illness or bankruptcy, or by a truck when I’m crossing the road. Then either I would hobble out of the hospital or I would end up in the funeral home. Then all my property would go to my lucky heir.”

“Yes, but this heir would be your own child. You surely don’t begrudge your own child inheriting your wealth, Mr. Kovács, do you?”

“Of course not, he is my own son after all! He graduates this year from a good Budapest high school. But that’s not the point. What I’m getting at is, how unjust it is that you work night and day, steal, cheat and lie if you have to, and sometimes lie even when you don’t have to, and then just like that you kick the bucket. Then, straightaway somebody steps into your shoes who took no part in all your hard work but can enjoy its rewards – even if that person is your own child – and for the rest of their lives they can enjoy the blessings of the wealth that you have accumulated through the sweat of your brow or the ingenuity of your brain, without their having had to lift a finger.”

“Look at the people at this banquet. Do you see how many attractive, well-dressed young men and women there are here. I don’t think





they come from the wrong part of town. Obviously mom and dad have ensured that they have a good future, by providing them with a good start in life. They would be able to live well even if they never worked. Maybe that is why they work so hard at not being bored and convincing themselves that they are useful. But who benefits from all this, apart from them? What do they contribute to society? As they get richer, they deprive the poor of the chance of improving their lot. Their fathers and mothers, or grandfathers and grandmothers, have already taken a big slice of the cake. And now they are trying their hardest to grab as much as possible from what is left. If they see somebody in front of them, they can tell you almost to the last cent how much that person's clothes, shoes and accessories are worth. They will quickly weigh up any other items the person might have: cell-phone, gold necklace, wristwatch, handbag etc. and from this they will make a quick estimate of the person's wealth. If there is an automobile, the value of that will obviously be included in the calculation. If the estimate of the wealth on view comes to more than a million forints and the car has a value of more than 5 million forints then the person is considered to be worth associating with. Once they are accepted into the ranks of the wealthy, they have it made and can take advantage of this acceptance. I went to university in Budapest so I know what things are like here. But that was almost twenty years ago."

"You perhaps have a better idea of what things are like here than I do. I must say your Hungarian is excellent, Ambassador. You seem to be a bit of a liberal. But can I help it if I have made a lot of money? Of course, nobody forced me to go into business, but I'd have been an idiot if I hadn't taken advantage of the opportunities offered by privatization. It's true my business is doing pretty badly at the moment. All three of my companies are on the verge of bankruptcy, and it's quite possible that soon I'll have to sell them at a loss. I won't starve, but it won't be easy to get back into the world of the super-rich. I do, however, believe that one day the world will be just and everybody will be equal. Of course, not in the way some of the great thinkers of the last one hundred and fifty years imagined it, who only left one human attribute out of their calculations – the ever-present desire to accumulate wealth. Recently, somebody told me that the Bible describes in detail a new world based on complete equality. I haven't checked this out yet, though I intend to. You know I'm not easily fooled."





“Nowadays, it’s trendy to read the Bible but I myself don’t think much of it. It’s full of contradictions and improbable happenings. Who knows how much of it is true and how much comes from the writers’ imagination? Most of my friends and acquaintances think it’s just a collection of legends. The so-called experts who try to explain the Bible don’t convince me either.”

“Well, I don’t think there is a single contradiction in it. It’s just that we don’t understand certain things in the Bible. Have you read it all the way through?”

“To tell you the truth, I haven’t. But I’ve read bits of it.”

“You say it’s full of contradictions. All right, tell me a really big one!”

“Well, there’s mm... I’ve got it! I’ve just remembered one that had me puzzled recently when I was reading a book on the Bible.”

“What was that then?”

“Well, you know how the resurrection of Jesus is celebrated at Easter? Well, in the Christian churches they usually read a passage from the New Testament describing how Jesus died at 3 p.m. on a Friday afternoon and rose from the dead in the early hours of Sunday morning.”

“Where is the contradiction in that?”

“There isn’t one, but there is a part in the New Testament, if I remember rightly it’s in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus himself foretells that he will spend three days and three nights in the belly of the earth, in other words in the tomb.”

“And why is that a problem for you, Ambassador?”

“Well, just think about it for a second. If your Jesus died at 3 p.m. on a Friday afternoon and was immediately buried, though, from what I’ve read, one or two things happened before the actual burial, and he rose from the dead in the early hours of Sunday morning, then he was in the tomb, at the most, two nights and a whole day. That leaves us with three possibilities: either he died long enough before Friday that by the time of his resurrection early on Sunday morning three days and three nights had gone by, or he died on the Friday, and didn’t rise from the dead on Sunday, but only after three days and three nights in the tomb.”

“And what is the third possibility?”

“Well, that quite simply your Jesus didn’t tell the truth. This allegation that Jesus lied is one of the irrefutable arguments of those non-Christians who believe in God, but who don’t accept that Jesus was the Savior or that he was the son of God.”





“Look here, Ambassador! I couldn’t call myself a practicing Christian, but nevertheless I must reject this suggestion of yours that Jesus Christ lied, no matter what certain representatives of non-Christian religions might say.”

“No, no, my friend, if you will allow me to call you that. I didn’t say that your Jesus lied. I was just pointing out that if he was telling the truth, then what you Christians have been saying for almost two thousand years now, can’t be true, namely that Jesus was in the tomb from Friday afternoon until the early hours of Sunday morning, in other words he was there thirty-six hours at the most.”

“How interesting! That’s the first time I’ve heard of such a thing. So, let me get this straight. If Jesus didn’t really spend three days and three nights in the tomb, then he was lying. If, however, this can’t be proved one way or the other, then the whole Bible and Christianity itself rest on the shaky foundations of such doubtful statements. But I’m sure you agree, Ambassador, that this is not the way to approach this question.”

“Well, my friend, we haven’t got much choice. As you say in your Hungarian folk tales, if you don’t believe it, check it out for yourself! I bet that if we met in a year’s time, we would be in the same position then, as we are in now! You would still have your doubts and my position would still be that this question must be resolved.”

“I’m sure you know the book ‘Around the World in Eighty Days’ by Jules Verne. Well, Ambassador, I think that eighty days would be enough for me to find the answer to this question.”

“Do you really think that eighty days will be enough time for you to solve a riddle that has remained unanswered for two thousand years? In fact, very few people are even aware of the existence of such a riddle. If you manage to find the solution and prove that your Jesus really did spend three days and three nights in the tomb, as he had foretold, then you would simultaneously clear him of the charge of lying and would glorify his name in the eyes of non-Christian believers. You would, however, present your fellow Christians around the world with a choice: either they accept the new findings and defend Jesus against those who consider him a cheat and a liar and who don’t consider him to be the son of God; or they stick to their belief that there is no explanation for this contradiction, and they leave everything connected with it veiled in the fog of mystery that has surrounded it so far.”





“Well, after what you’ve just said, Ambassador, what’s to stop us making a bet just like the gentlemen in the book. Of course, there would have to be some serious money at stake: what about a nice round figure, a million dollars for instance? I think I could raise that amount of cash if I sold my three companies.”

“Hold on a minute, my friend! You forget that I am not one of the super-rich like you. I am only an ambassador. But you’re right, we should play for high stakes. I’ll tell you what, if, within eighty days, you are unable to give a definite answer to this question, you will pay me three hundred thousand dollars.”

“And you will pay the same amount to me if I can come up with the answer. But, three hundred thousand dollars seem peanuts compared to the importance of this question, don’t you think? I’m sure you realize that this is a matter of extraordinary significance.”

“I realize that in your present financial situation, a million dollars would come in very handy, but if you can really manage to answer this question you will be world-famous, in all the newspapers, giving interviews on television. In other words, you would be able to exploit your fame financially in all sorts of ways.”

“I would get into the history books. Children would read about me at school. That would be great! Money and glory at the same time. But are you certain that it would happen like that?”

“The only certainty is death. Though, from what I heard a preacher say the other day, perhaps it isn’t. Now, I think the best thing for us to do would be to get our feet back on the ground. We should make our bet official and put it on a legal footing. Wait a second! Hi, Freddy, my old friend, could I tear you away from these charming people for just a few moments? Allow me to introduce you. This is Dr. Alfred Anxious, who is a notary public. And this is Archimedes Kovács. I’m sure you have heard of him.”

“I’ve heard of both of them, of Mr. Kovács and of Archimedes. Sorry about the joke. Of course, I know who Mr. Kovács is, he’s well known in Hungary as a successful businessman.”

“All right, Freddy. I want you to set down in a legal document the bet that Mr. Kovács and I are going to make.”

“Certainly, no problem.”



CHAPTER TWO

**Mr. Kovács Begins His Research**

“Well, I’ve made the bet, so I had better start doing something. Three hundred thousand dollars is not such a big sum, perhaps sixty million forints, but I would struggle to pay up if I lost, in fact I would probably go bankrupt. But if I win, that will get me out of the pickle I’m in. And why shouldn’t I win? Now then, let’s think. Who better to give me information about such a topic than a priest. Right, let’s find one quickly. Hey, Jenci! Get the car ready, we’re going to church.”

“Church? If I remember rightly, boss, the last time that you were in church was at your own wedding and that was about twenty years ago.”

“Listen here, Jenci! When I want your comments, I’ll ask for them. Anyway, this is not an ordinary visit, we’re going to church to do some research.”

“More amusements for the idle rich, I suppose. You guys are always thinking up some weird way of spending your time.”

“Park in front of that gate. I won’t be long, I just want to ask one or two things from one or two priests. But at least one thing from at least one priest. I’ve rung but nobody is answering. What can have happened? Where can the clergy be? What do you think Jenci, the priests can’t all be at mass, can they?”

“You mean they are at mass en masse?”

“Very funny!”

“Who is it? I’m coming. I never get a moment’s peace. Good day to you. What can I do for you, my son?”

“I’d like you to give me the answer to a question I have about the Bible.”

“Tell me, my son, do you ever go to mass? Because I’ve never seen you before.”

“Well, I don’t really go.”

“What do you mean, you don’t *really* go? Do you go or don’t you?”

“No. All right, I don’t go at all. But I’d still like you to answer my question.”

“All right, I’ll help you, my son, but I’ll expect to see you at mass in the future.”

“What I’d like to know is, if Jesus died at three o’clock on a Friday afternoon and he rose from the dead early on Sunday morning, in other

words thirty-six hours later, even if we include the time that elapsed between the moment of his death and the placing of his body in the tomb, how could he have spent three days and three nights in the tomb as he himself foretold, according to Matthew's Gospel?"

"Are you being serious? He was in the tomb three days: Friday, Saturday and Sunday. That makes exactly three days, doesn't it? So, I don't understand your question."

"But two of those three days don't seem to be the regulation length."

"Regulation length? You have to understand these things in their context. Anyway, I hope to see you at Sunday mass."

CHAPTER THREE

**Mr. Kovács Doesn't Give Up**

"**P**erhaps that church is too big for me. Or maybe it's too traditional. I need something a bit smaller, with a more human face and not so intimidating. Good Heavens! What a lot of different denominations are listed. I'll just choose one at random. This'll do. From the name it could be anything, but it just so happens I have heard of this one and I know it's a Christian church. Hello!"

"Hello! How can I help you?"

"Could I speak to one of your pastors? I'd like an authoritative answer to a question on the Bible."

"I think it would be better if you could come to us in person. Our pastor receives people every Wednesday from 3 p.m. until 4 p.m. Tomorrow is a Wednesday and he isn't expecting anybody, so why don't you come. We'd love to meet you."

"Thank you, I will."



"Well, here we are. Are you sure they said Wednesday, Jenci?"

"It could've been Thursday."

"You think you're funny, don't you? Look, there is the name of the church. So, we're in the right place, at least. You wait here. I'll be back in half an hour at the most."



“Please, come in. We’ve been expecting you. Take a seat. Our pastor is on his way.”

“Thank you.”

“Aah! Hello. It’s Mr. Kovács, isn’t it? I saw you the other day on the television. You had some very good ideas on reducing unemployment. You haven’t come to talk about that, I trust.”

“No, I’ve come about something completely different. The thing is, there is something in the Bible that I just don’t understand. And I thought that being so familiar with the Holy Scriptures you would be the person to enlighten me.”

“What is your question, Mr. Kovács?”

“Well, according to Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus foretold that just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so he would be three days and three nights in the belly of the earth, in other words in his tomb. However, the Bible also says that Jesus died on a Friday afternoon and rose from the dead early on Sunday morning. If this is correct, then he spent at most thirty-six hours in his tomb, even if we include the time that elapsed between his death and the placing of his dead body there.”

“Look here, Mr. Kovács, why is this so important to you? The important thing is that Jesus died for us and redeemed us from our sins. Does it really matter how many days he was in his tomb?”

“I’d still like to know what exactly happened.”

“What exactly happened! Only God knows everything exactly. What I can tell you is that the Jews counted their days differently. Even parts of a day were counted as whole days. So there was the Friday, the Saturday and a bit of the Sunday. In the end it doesn’t really matter. One way or another it comes to three days.”

“That sounds all right to me, but the man who raised this issue, doesn’t think much of the Bible and an explanation like that won’t wash with him. ‘One way or another it comes to three days’ somehow doesn’t seem an irrefutable argument to me. Thank you, Pastor, anyway for your help. Goodbye.”

“God bless you, Mr. Kovács. It was a pleasure meeting you. I sincerely hope you will find a way to help our church in the future.”

“I may call round again to see you in the next few days, if that’s all right with you.”

“Call in any time you want. I hope we can help you again.”



CHAPTER FOUR

**Mr. Kovács Still Doesn't Give Up**

“I don't think the Ambassador will be convinced by an argument like that. I need something more solid. I'll have to go to another one of these smaller churches. But which one? What about this one? I've heard a lot about it. I'll give them a call. Hello! I wonder if you could help me? I have a question about the Bible that I hope you can answer.”

“It's good to hear that in today's world there are still people who read the Bible.”

“Could I ask my question?”

“I think it would be better if you went to the congregation of our church that is nearest to your home and put the question to one of our pastors there. He will provide you with an explanation for any question you might care to ask.”

“I live in the umpteenth district, at 77 Somewhere Street.”

“Well, the congregation of our church closest to your home is at 3 Main Square. Ask for Louis Fireaway!”



“What a lot of people there are here. A bunch of adults and children. There must be about one hundred and fifty in this small room. They're swarming like termites. Everybody seems to be trying to talk at the same time. But where is their senior pastor? Hello! Excuse me miss, where can I find the pastor of the congregation?”

“Hello! It's your first time here isn't it? Please, follow me. Our senior pastor, Louis Fireaway, is in this room. He's counseling some of the other pastors. It looks as though he has just finished. Come with me, I'll introduce you to him. What is your name please?”

“My name is Archimedes Kovács.”

“Louie, this is Mr. Kovács.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Kovács. Fireaway.”

“I can see you haven't much time, so I'll come straight to the point. I'd like you to help me to answer a question about the Bible.”

“Well, I haven't much time before we start. But ask your question anyway, I may be able to give you a short answer.”