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# The Songs of Distant Earth and Other Stories

ARTHUR C. CLARKE



# THE SONGS OF DISTANT EARTH


## and Other Stories

Nobody knows how big the universe is. Does it have an end, or does it go on for ever? Is there more than one universe? The distances in space are so great that they are measured in light-years, and who knows how many stars and planets lie beyond the reach of the eyes and ears of our science?

These stories are full of the mysteries of the universe. Why do the Tibetan lamas want to find out the nine billion names of God? What is the terrible secret discovered by scientists working on the Moon? On a far distant planet, under a different sun, Shervane knows he must cross the Wall of Darkness, even if madness lies on its other side. Bill Cross, at home on Earth, hears friendly voices in his mind; he thinks he has drunk too much whisky and does not understand the warning coming from the planet Thaar five hundred light-years away.

And on the planet Thalassa, Lora watches the starship *Magellan* as it flies in from outer space, bringing with it love and pain and dreams – the sweet sad songs of distant Earth . . .






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*Fantasy & Horror*

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The Songs of Distant Earth  
and Other Stories  
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Edited by  
Jennifer Bassett



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ARTHUR C. CLARKE

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of Distant Earth  
and Other Stories

*Retold by*  
Jennifer Bassett



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## THE NINE BILLION NAMES OF GOD

‘This is rather unusual,’ said Dr Wagner, trying very hard to hide his amazement. ‘I think this must be the first time that anyone has been asked to send an Automatic Sequence Computer to a monastery in Tibet. I don’t wish to seem impolite, but I do wonder what use your – er – organization has for a machine like this. Could you explain just what you plan to do with it?’

‘Gladly,’ replied the lama, carefully putting away his little notebook. ‘Your Mark 5 Computer can do all kinds of routine mathematical work which involves up to ten figures. However, for our work we are interested in *letters*, not numbers. For this reason we wish you to change the machine so that it prints out lists of words, not figures.’

‘I don’t quite understand . . .’

‘We have been doing this work for the last three centuries – since the monastery first began, in fact. It is a little foreign to your way of thought, so I hope you will listen with an open mind while I explain it.’

‘Naturally.’

‘It is really quite simple. We have been making a list which will contain all the possible names of God.’

Dr Wagner’s eyes opened very wide.

‘We have reason to believe,’ continued the lama calmly, ‘that all these names can be written with not more than nine letters in an alphahet we have invented.’

'And you have been doing this for three centuries?'

'Yes. We expected it would take us about fifteen thousand years to finish the list.'

'Oh,' Dr Wagner said slowly. 'Yes, I can see why you want one of our machines. But what exactly is your *purpose* in making this list?'

The lama hesitated for a second, and Dr Wagner wondered if the question had annoyed him. But the reply came with the same calm politeness as before.

'It is a very important part of what we believe. All the many names of the Great Being – God, Allah, Jehovah, and so on – are just names invented by humans. There are certain problems in these ideas which I do not wish to discuss here. But we believe that somewhere among all the possible arrangements of letters are what we can call the *real* names of God. By going through every possible arrangement of letters, we have been trying to list them all.'

'I see. You've been starting at AAAAAAA . . . and working through to ZZZZZZZ . . .'

'Exactly – though we use a special alphabet of our own. I'm afraid it would take too long to explain all the details, as you don't understand our language.'

'I'm sure it would,' said Dr Wagner hurriedly.

'Luckily, it will be quite easy to make the necessary changes to your Automatic Sequence Computer so that it will do this work for us and print out the names. Instead of fifteen thousand years, we shall be able to finish the list in a hundred days.'



*'We have been trying to list all the real names of God.'*

Dr Wagner could hear the sounds of the New York streets far below his office, but he felt that he was in a different world. High up in their distant, lonely mountains these lamas had been patiently at work, year after year, making their lists of meaningless words. Was there no end to the foolishness of human beings? But he must not show what he was thinking. The customer was always right . . .

'There's no doubt,' Dr Wagner said, 'that we can change the Mark 5 to print lists of this kind. I'm much more worried

about the problems of making sure your computer is in good working condition when it arrives. And getting things out to Tibet, in these days, is not easy.'

'We can arrange that. The various parts of the computer are small enough to travel by air. If you can get them to India, we will collect them from there.'

'And you want to hire two of our engineers?'

'Yes, for the three months that the work should take.'

'There's no problem about that.' Dr Wagner wrote a note to remind himself. 'There are two more things . . .'

Before he could finish, the lama had passed him a piece of paper. 'This is from our bank and is signed, as you will see, by the manager.'

'Thank you,' Dr Wagner said, looking at the figures. 'That seems to be — er — adequate. The second question may seem a little strange, but sometimes these simple things get forgotten. There is electricity available . . .?'

'Yes, we brought in machinery for making electricity about five years ago and it works very well. It's made life at the monastery much more comfortable, but the main reason for bringing it in, of course, was to have motors to drive the prayer wheels.'

'Of course,' echoed Dr Wagner. 'Why didn't I think of that?'

\* \* \*

The view from the monastery took one's breath away at first, but in time one gets used to anything. After three months, George Hanley didn't really notice the seven-hundred-metre drop, straight down into the valley below.