



Walls of Acid

Hasse, Henry

Published: 1947

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

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About Hasse:

Henry Louis Hasse (1913 - 1977) was an American science fiction author and fan. He is probably best known for being the co-author on Ray Bradbury's first published story, "Pendulum" (November 1941 in *Super Science Stories*). Hasse's novelette "He Who Shrank" is anthologized in both Isaac Asimov's memoir of 1930s science fiction *Before the Golden Age* and in the classic 1946 collection *Adventures in Time and Space*, edited by Raymond J. Healy and J. Francis McComas.

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- *We're Friends, Now* (1960)
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Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Fantasy Book* Vol. 1 Number 1 (1947). Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

BRAANOL STIRRED, THROBBED sluggishly once, then lay quiescent as his mental self surged up from the deeps of non-entity. And gradually he came to know that someone had entered the room. His *room*, far beneath the city.

Now he could feel the vibra-currents through the liquids of the huge tanks where he had lain somnolent for untold aeons. It was pleasant, caressing. For a moment he floated there, enjoying to the utmost this strange sensation as the renewed thought-life-force set his every convolution to pulsing.

"To be once more aware! O gloriously aware!" the thought came fierce and vibrant. "Once more they have wakened me—but how long has it been?" Then curiously: "And what can they want this time?"

The huge brain was alert now, with a supernal sense of keening. Tentatively he sent out a thought-potential that encompassed the room.

"They are afraid!" he sensed. "Two have entered here, and they are afraid of me. I shall remedy that!"

Braanol lowered his thought-potential to one-eighth of one magnitude, and felt his mind contact theirs. "Approach, my children," he said kindly. "You have nothing to fear from me! I take it you are the imperial messengers sent by her Supreme Magnificence, the Empress Alaazar?"

He felt the fright slip from their minds. But they were startled.

"The Empress Uldulla reigns now, fourth in the Royal line," came the thought. "Empress Alaazar died long ago!"

"I am truly grieved!" Braanol flashed to them. "Alaazar—may she rest in peace—did not neglect me! How well I remember her interest in the stories I could tell, stories of the Diskra of old when we sent men out to glorious adventures on the other planets! Aye! Five millenniums ago it was that we achieved space travel. In those days—"

Braanol ceased in his reminiscences, aware that these two were trying to get their thoughts through to him.

"That is why we have come! The Empress Uldulla, too, wishes a story. The story of the first space-flight from Diskra, and the events that brought it about. And of how you—"

"Aye! Of how *I* came to be as you see me now! I shall be delighted, my children, to tell it again. But first, prepare the trans-telector so that it may be recorded faithfully."

Braanol directed them to a machine on the far side of the room, and instructed them as to its operation. Soon the hundreds of tiny coils were humming, and a maze of tubes fed out of the machine, on which would be recorded Braanol's every thought. For a moment he paused, gently

swaying, pulsing, a huge independent brain suspended in the pale green liquid. Then he began his story.

YOUR SUPREME BENEFICENCE! When the imperial messengers came to me, bringing the communication with which you deigned to address my decrepit solitude, it was like a glorious ray of light come to illumine the deepening darkness of my declining years!

It is with trepidation that I set about to fulfill your Exalted Command. Five millenniums, aye, even more, have passed, since those who were part of that segment of history into which you inquire, have become but drifting dust. Only within the feeble memory of your humblest servant is there any record of it.

Five millenniums! Aye! That was truly the golden period of our beloved Diskra—not that our period under *Your* Serene Effulgence is not golden indeed! But in that day all Diskra was under the glorious rule of Palladin. His city on the scarlet shores of our central sea was the wonder of us *all*. Aye! We had a sea then, where there is now but desert.

The intelligent planets were three: our own Diskra, of course, fourth from the sun. And nearest the sun, Mirla, that fiery globe, where life apes the quality of our own salamander, existing by necessity near the flames. And second from the sun Venia, the cloud-capped world, where life exalts the virtues of the fish. Of the third planet, Terra, we then knew little.

Our cities faced the sun in those days, towering in polychromatic splendor. Height was no obstacle then, for we had wings—wings! Think of it, O Beneficence! No need had we of clumsy, metal vessels. But all that has changed. Now no whirr of wings disturbs the air, and our formiductural splendors rise *within*. The history of this change is what Your Supreme Exaltation would know. This, then, is the record.

With the rule of Palladin was born the age of science, not so much due to the intellects of that day, as through the driving urge of ultimate necessity. For Palladin had a brother, Thid. He was unfortunately a mutant. Whereas our features were delicate and quite regular, Thid's were gross and stamped with power. His royal head was too large and cumbersome, and instead of our slender waists, he was almost asymmetrical in shape. In short—no member of our fairer, royal sex could look upon him with aught but horror. And it was because of this that he was dietetically conditioned for the realm of science.

It was a mistake. As the years passed, the loneliness of his virtual exile tended to derange Thid's prodigious mind! Aye, prodigious—and dangerous in his manic-depressive state. Then one day Palladin called an

emergency meeting of the Inner Council. I, Braanol, was a member of that Council.

"It has come to my attention," Palladin said, "that Thid has been carrying on certain dangerous experiments! Experiments of a sort that could well be inimical to us—to our very existence!"

We well knew to what Palladin referred. But Thid was his brother, one of the Imperial ones. No one dared speak.

"Why was I not made aware of it sooner?" Palladin demanded sternly. "You, Braanol! You knew of it?"

"Yes, your majesty." I was frightened. "I beg to explain—I have tried to dissuade him—"

Palladin's visage became less stern, as though he understood our reluctance in this matter. "True," he said. "Thid is my brother. He must be mad! And I tell you now: if he has gone as far in this experiment as I suspect, I shall not hesitate to apply the only remedy dictated by efficiency—death! Have him brought to me at once."

But Thid was nowhere to be found. He had learned of Palladin's anger, and had fled into the Diskran desert where the abhorred *Termans* dwelt in myriads despite all our effort to eradicate them. These *Termans* were soft-bodied, subterranean creatures with an obstinate life-force, and we had long realized that they might one day be a menace to us.

So into the desert our Thid fled, spurred by the knowledge that his life was forfeit. For a time, he was naturally thought dead. Who could survive unprotected the extremes of heat and cold? And if by a miracle he triumphed over the elements, how survive the appalling enmity of the *Termans*, whose rudimentary brains conceived no mercy?

Nevertheless, startling bits of rumor began to drift in to our city; rumors that Thid had been seen, *leading hordes of gigantic Termans across the desert wastes!*

We laughed, of course, for caravaneers are ever the prey of sun mirages, and legends are dear to their souls. A legend was begun concerning Thid. Arriving caravans vied with each other in fantastic reports. Some had seen him with immense hordes of the repulsive *Termans*. Still others had discovered subterranean labyrinths being built by the *Termans* under his command, and had barely escaped with their lives. And still we laughed, blessed by the constant climate on the shores of our sea, and the beneficent rule of our Exalted Palladin.

And then we ceased to laugh. Palladin called together his Council of Scientists.

"Can it be?" Palladin asked. "Two whole caravans have vanished on the way to Estka beyond the mountains." And he told us more, reports that had arrived from other cities. Survivors had arrived, with the light of madness in their eyes, babbling some nameless fear. Others had died from ghastly wounds—great burns that refused to heal, but spread a kind of disease through the tissues. I, Braanol, examined some of these wounds and reported to Palladin.

"Only a perverted, scientific intellect such as Thid's could have evolved weapons to inflict such wounds!"

"If he has organized the Termans," suggested another Council Member, "despite their pigmy size, they will become a menace that cannot be ignored."

"We have delayed too long!" thundered Palladin. "Find Thid! I command it!"

AN ARMY, THE GREATEST ever assembled on Diskra, was sent forth to hunt out Thid and exterminate the Termans whom he had managed to organize by heaven only knew what magic. The planet must be cleansed of that leprous form of life, else there would be no peace.

But we did not know what depths of horror we were to plumb. Even now, O Illustrious Empress, reason reels and totters at the remembrance. *I* led one fine division of the Imperial Guards, armored warriors of the first magnitude. With them I felt able to conquer planets, not to speak of the trivial-sized Termans.

For many days we trekked, penetrating ever deeper the Red Desert's heart. But of the abhorred Termans we caught no sight. There was only the molten downpour of sun by day, and the desiccating numbness of cold at night. But on the sixth day, as we encamped near an underground pool located by our experts—we encountered the Termans.

The blue wings of dusk were beating down when suddenly, from every rampart of sand-dune, every crumbling hillock, out of the very bowels of the planet itself, they came like an avalanche. They carried slender metal tubes that spewed polychromatic death at us! Wherever the deadly discharge touched, would appear horrible burns that ate away the tissues. But that isn't what paralyzed us. We had known these vermin to be short of twelve inches tall, but now they reared monstrously *four feet into the air!* Their black, hairy limbs lashed in an ecstasy of murder-lust, their beady eyes gleamed with fiendish purpose. And they had *intelligent leaders!*

The sight of these monsters grown to such awful size struck terror into the hearts of our legion. Nevertheless, we, who are seven feet tall, towered above them as we fought with the strength and ferocity of desperation. Every weapon at our command was brought into play, and they were blasted and seared by the myriads. Still they came on, blindly, unswervingly, as if driven by a single prodigious force.

How these life-forms had grown to such bestial proportions was not known until later. We captured a few and delicately probed them—while still alive, of course—dissecting their anatomy until we found that some genius had managed to control their growth through glandular development. That genius could only have been our Thid!

Soon the desert was covered by a sea of their dead—and ours! The stench was unbearable, for the Termans exude an odor of their own, particularly in death, which is sheer nausea ... but lest I offend your refined sensibilities, O Serene Empress, perhaps it were best that I draw a veil of darkness over that shambles of horror. At last it seemed as if only utter annihilation of both sides would be the outcome. Already the battle had lasted for three obeisances of our Diskra to its parent sun.

And then wisely, our glorious Palladin flashed to us the command to retreat.

"Already Estka and Kraaj have fallen, with all the populace wiped out," said the message. "The Termans are converging upon our capital city! Return here with all haste!"

So it was that we retreated—those who remained of us—to the capitol, and prepared to make a formidable stand. The other armies of our empire had done likewise. Who would have thought that this despised, destructive form of life could ever become such a menace! We remembered one of Thid's treatises on the noxious pests, in which he had maintained that they had rudimentary intelligence and an interesting, if sub-primitive, form of social life. How we had laughed at the thought of imputing a social order to these subterranean aphids!

But we weren't laughing now! A race of malignant monsters had sprung up in the twenty years that Thid had vanished into the desert.

OF THID, nothing more was seen. But we knew he must still exist somewhere among the Termans. Under that baleful inventive genius their weapons seemed to multiply, and we were forced to tax our scientists to the utmost in order to have weapons, of offense—and yes, O Beneficence—defense!

For now, though we had managed to stem their attack on our capital, they were steadily encroaching on our territory. Underground lakes and streams were dammed by these fiends. Vast areas of vegetation were denuded. Precious mines of rare metals were converted by them, under Thid's direction, into sources for their ceaseless attacks. Aye! We died a thousand deaths multiplied a thousand times.

Our ethero-magnum, by which our telepathic vibrations were amplified for planetary broadcast, became a monotonous recorder of tragedy as city after city fell to the hordes. For untold years this savage struggle went on. How well we realized that this was a war for sole dominance of the planet!

Until at last, only our proud capital by the shores of the scarlet sea, and its immense valley was left to us.

"We must evolve the principles of inter-spacial travel," Palladin told us sadly. "The day may come when we shall need it."

Hitherto, our rare flights to Venia and Mirla had been primitive affairs in which the dangerous rocket principle was employed, with the terrific effects of acceleration crushing the crews and making landing an even greater hazard than the flight itself. But now, through inconceivable efforts of thought—aye, through sheer desperation!—our scientists evolved a system of atomic integration in which free orbital electrons were utilized to create atomic quantities beyond our known table, drawing upon the energy that could be harnessed in the process. It is difficult to describe otherwise than through pure mathematics—though if your Serene Effulgence wishes, I will be happy to describe it to you at a later date; it will take some little effort to recall the exact formulae.

"We must send an expedition to Terra," Palladin told us. "From what we have been able to gather astronomically, that planet seems habitable. Mirla, we know, is out of the question; it is a holocaust of fire. And to dwell on the semi-aquatic world of Venia, a new environmental adaptation would be necessary."

Fantastic, wasn't it, O Exalted Empress, that we the rightful Lords of Diskra should be compelled to abandon our beloved homes by a horde of vermin? Indeed it was a tragic day when the first scientific expedition was assembled. And I, Braanol, was honored beyond my humble desserts by his Supreme Magnificence, Palladin. I was assigned as *Recorder* on the expedition.

Strapped and cushioned until not an inch of my body was visible, I was launched into space together with my fellow scientists, within the spheroid confines of our atomic projectile. The agony of enduring—even

for seconds—the required acceleration, will forever remain in my mind as the ultimate in torture. But at last the agony was gone, as we traveled at unimaginable speed toward the planet which we hoped would be our future home.

No, not hoped—because meanwhile on Diskra the experiments with acid gas were going on, in a sort of last-ditch defense which we hoped might stem the endless hordes!

IT WAS ON THE eleventh day that we really saw Terra in its full prismatic glory. For days it had loomed larger in our three-dimensional electro-cone, where we studied its continents and oceans to select the likeliest spot for a landing. Terra was intensely blue now, rivalling in color the priceless *zafirines* of our own Diskra. I hope in the humblest depths of my mind, O Empress Uldulla, that you shall never know the unplumbed abyss of loneliness we all felt.

At last we were forced to use the forward atomic beam to brake our meteoric entrance into the heavy atmosphere. We had, of course, turned on the neutralizing frigi-rectifiers that formed a network on the outer shell of our sphere. At last we were through. Dipping lower as we circled, we discerned majestic oceans; ice-clad peaks crowning the stark glory of the landscape, and then more inviting lands criss-crossed by rivers and studded with shining lakes.

It was to us, O Great Beneficence, a paradise indeed! Entranced, we all but forgot our landing which would require the utmost skill. Brunoj, our greatest navigator, was at the controls, padded and cushioned beyond the possibility of injury. The rest of us retired to the special crash-room.

I remember we carried in our laboratory, in a special container of *glassaran*, two embalmed specimens of the monstrous Termans. These we were to show as a warning to whatever race existed here. One glance at the revolting monsters would have been enough for an intelligent race.

But now that would not be necessary. Terra seemed uninhabited. We had seen no cities as we circumnavigated the globe. Had intelligent life-forms failed as yet to materialize on this verdant world? We assumed that fact, in our joyous eagerness to feel the good earth beneath us.

"Prepare to land!" came the warning from Brunoj.

TO THIS DAY I cannot say what happened. No one knew. For the brief instant in which I remained conscious, I felt as if Terra had burst asunder under the terrific impact.

Nor do I know when I finally struggled upward from oblivion; it may have been hours later, or days. Many among us were dead. I was a hopelessly crushed horror who still lived somehow, miraculously. For many days we remained within our sphere—disposing of the dead, tending to the injured, conserving our strength. I might have been destroyed, but with that frantic will to live which rises within us, I flashed a message to my companions:

"I still live! Place me in the delocalizer! I will still be of use!"

This was done. The delocalizer, reacting on the thalamic region of my brain, intercepted pain currents and allowed me to exist without *physical* feeling. Only my mind, lucid and intensely alive as never before, continued to record the adventure in this world. It was not until later that my brain was completely severed from my crushed body... .

My companions had tested the atmosphere and found no gasses that might have been inimical to our organisms. Thus they prepared for the greatest adventure of all—the emergence. The locks were opened. A draft of fragrant, if heavy atmosphere swept through our globe. It was pleasantly invigorating and bright outside—so I was told by their telepathic messages, for I alone remained within.

Telepathically they kept me informed, as they wandered up the narrow valley. The soil was firm and amazingly fertile. Vegetation grew thickly everywhere. They reached the far end of the valley at last, and rocky ramparts towered over them.

Then it was—how can I begin to describe it to you, Exalted Empress? From *their minds*, coming back to me, was a sudden flood of excited, hysterical thought! It seemed filled with intense loathing and fear! Imagine me there, if you can—helpless—and in a frenzy of despair wondering what they could have encountered!

Desperately I extended my potential. I managed to intuit a fierce battle in which they were engaging. And some of my companions were dying! Hordes of fierce denizens from the rocks above were descending upon them. They had taken weapons along, true—but I could sense now by their frantic thought that these war-like creatures of Terra numbered in the hundreds, with hordes of them swarming from beyond!

For a long while the battle raged, then I sensed that my companions were retreating. Oh, I was glad! Glad! At least I would not be left alone. But of the two score who had ventured out, only *six* returned. As they operated the lock of the ship, and tumbled in, I could see—or rather *perceive*—a long part of the terrain behind them.

Then it was that my mind sickened. *For the creatures of this bright new world were—Termans!* Slightly different from those we had battled on Diskra, true. These were even more monstrous, over six feet tall, with long shaggy manes and a reddish fuzz covering their four limbs ... and O Beneficence, I swear it—*sickening blue eyes!* They walked upright and carried crude weapons, shafts of wood fitted with sharp-edged *stone!*

Not until much later did my returning companions tell me what they had seen through their telescopic lenses. Just beyond this valley were vast plains where the Termans seemed to number in the thousands, huge nomadic tribes of them. There were other creatures as well, some massive beyond all belief, others fierce and blood-lusting with huge saber-like teeth.

"We could colonize Terra indeed," was the consensus of our thoughts, "but at what a price! To be forever battling these creatures—particularly the Termans, that abominable *genus Homo... .*"

Can you imagine, O Empress Uldulla, how the irony of it bit us? It was almost more than we could bear to think that on Diskra our own *genus Formicae* was in life-or-death struggle with these creatures and we had found them swarming here as well! All—all of this lush, verdant world was defiled!

There was nothing we remaining seven could do now. Sadly we set about repairing the ship, so that we could bear the awful tidings back to Diskra. And as we sped again toward our beloved planet, a sombre pall fell upon us. The interchange of thoughts were brief and tinged with a profound despair.

THIS RESOLVED into amazement, however, as we came ever closer to Diskra. For now, through our telecto-scope we could see that our planet had been subtly altered! A few symmetrical lines had appeared on the face of Diskra, as if a cosmic hand had drawn straight lines across with mathematical precision!

Not until we had safely landed, did we learn the truth. O joyous news! The hordes of Termans had been repulsed and were even then being slowly driven back! Our scientists had created in the laboratories a type of *formic acid* somewhat similar to the vesicatory secretion occurring within our own bodies—but infinitely more deadly! It had been used as a weapon against the Termans. And more! Huge walls of gaseous formic acid, held unwavering by electronic force fields, were being erected. It was these walls that caused the astronomical illusion we had seen from space.

The rest, O Illustrious Empress, I believe you know well. How the Ter-mans never again were able to penetrate our walls. How we waged war on the detestable creatures for a number of years until finally no trace of them remained on Diskra.

Aye! Five millenniums have passed since the events I have related. Five millenniums since my crushed body was done away with and I was preserved in my rectangle of *glassaran*, with the constantly renovated thought-life-fluid kept exquisitely warm. In this state I have accompanied many another expedition to the planets, in my capacity of official Recorder. I am but Yours to command, Exalted Empress, should you wish to hear of them.

But I have a warning! Slowly I have developed a new sense that needs not eyes, nor ears, nor sense of touch—no antennae even, such as I once possessed—but unites and transcends all these! And I beg of you in my most abject humility, *do not venture to remove even one formic-acid wall*, either from above or from its depth into the ground. Rather build more! Perceptively I shudder in the awful remembrance of their occasion, and the day may come when they will be needed once more.

Thus I warn humbly, and remain Your Supreme Fertility's most insignificant servant,

Braanol.

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