

Of Stegner' s Folly

When a twenty-foot goddess walked out of the jungle, they knew Stegner wasn't kidding.

By Richard S. Shaver

Only the fire-power of cannon could stop the monster.

OLD PROF STEGNER never foresaw the complications his selective anti-gravitational field would cause. Knowing the grand old man as I did, I can say that he never intended his "blessing" should become the curse to mankind that it did. And the catastrophe it brought about was certainly beyond range of all prophecy.

Of course, anyone who lived in 1972 and tried to get inside Stegner's weird life-circle must agree that you can get too much of a good thing. Even a pumpkin can get too big—and that's what happened when the Prof turned on his field—things got big; and too darned healthy!

I was there the day Stegner announced the results of ten year's research on his selector. Nearly everyone present had read the sensational articles concerning his work in the feature sections of the big town newspapers. Like the rest, I had a vague idea of what it was about. It seemed the Prof had developed a device that repelled various particles of matter without effecting others. In short, if he turned on his gadget, gravity reversed itself for certain elements, and they went away in a hurry. Like this: he could take oxide of iron, turn on his selective repeller, and the rust rather magically turned to pure iron without the oxygen. Or, he could take a pile of mixed chemicals, turn his control knobs to the elements known to be present in the mixture, and presto! Only certain ones, of his choosing remained. The atoms of the other elements conveniently left the vicinity.

All of which was interesting and extremely useful. The Prof promptly got rich selling patent rights to the device, tuned to certain frequencies which refined heretofore unrefinable ores. His device made an improvement over most known methods of refining, costing far less in operation than the standard and often complicated methods previously in use.

Money gave the old man his opportunity. He fitted out a big research lab in California, not too far from civilization, but secluded enough for secrecy. Then he set about to try his selective repeller on living tissues. His suspicion, that wonderful things could be discovered if he tuned his anti-gravitational field to the undesirable elements in the body, was confirmed. Like lead poisoning—something no doctor can cure if it is severe. He found that he could cure a case of lead poisoning merely by making the lead go away from there via the field. More wonderful things began to come out of the Stegner laboratory, and he made a lot more money,

Which was all very well indeed, only the Prof couldn't leave well enough alone—he had to delve and pry. He had his own theories about disease and its cause, old age, and so on—all nuttier than a fruit cake. He was something of a crank on various health foods and diets that left out foods raised with chemical fertilizers. He had an organic garden, a garden where no chemical fertilizer or poison spray was ever used. And after all, who knew better than the Prof—who could isolate them in a trice—how many poisons could be found accumulafing in the average human body, consumed along with perfectly harmless foods during a lifetime?

Anyway, when the Prof called in the press, myself among them, he was really excited. "Gentlemen," he said, "I have solved the greatest medical puzzle of all time. Before me, no medical man knew the cause of old age. I have proved what the deterioration factor is, and I have provided a remedy—a sure and immediate remedy! The golden age of mankind is here! Our life span can be greatly extended!"

I looked at Jake Heinz, my cameraman. Jake winked at me, but I didn't respond. I liked the Prof. Such a fine old gentleman, to go whacky from so much success ...

Jake took a few shots of the Prof's rabbits and guinea pigs, of the Prof himself, and of the apparatus he had constructed which he claimed drove out the causative poison of age; a poison he called a radioactive isotope of Potassium. The other reporters, not having the soft hearts Jake and I toted around, wrote him up as a joke; said right out they thought the old boy was blowing his top. Immortality! Hah!

They presented the whole thing as a farce.

No reporters were ever more wrong than those smart buckos.

ONLY MONTHS after the Prof's little news conference was over and forgotten, an item of vast importance turned up. It seemed that around Stegner's secluded retreat there was a line where things started. What kind of things? Well, up to that line, things were normal; but beyond it, grass got enormous, the ground was higher and softer. Trees forgot to shed their leaves. Animals flocked there to eat the lush grass, so the Prof erected a ten-foot electrified fence around his land to keep out the hordes of rabbits, deer, mice and what have you that came to feast off the new supply of better forage.

That was only the beginning. Some months later there came items about houseflies the size of walnuts hatching out around the Prof's retreat. Now a swarm of 'houseflies the size of walnuts is news, and Jake and I got up there on the jump.

It was terrific! The flies were there all right, but so were a good many other oversized creatures. Roosting in the trees were robins, bluebirds, and doves as large as turkeys. King-sized ducks waddled about importantly, displaying pouter-pigeon crops from overeating. It was as if some god had drawn a line and said: "This is the new Eden, where all living things will prosper terrifically."

You never saw a sight like it! Or did you? Were you one of the horde who started camping around the Prof's magic circle trying to get permission to enter?

It was then we got proof that it pays to be kind. Of all the news-grabbers who surrounded the Prof's big wire gate, Jake and I were the only ones who got in. The old man had not forgotten who had taken him seriously and who had made fun of him.

Jake snapped a series of startling pies of the oversized animals and birds. I interviewed the Prof again, even got his maid, Tilda's opinions, and wrote it up as unsensationally as possible, playing down the tremendous potential for trouble, playing up the really effective method the old scientist had discovered for "eliminating the deterioration factor" in life. I could see where the world was in for some changes, and the going was going to be rough enough for the old man without making it worse. But my efforts came to naught when the pies Jake had taken reached the editor's desk. He hit the ceiling, called me on the carpet, wanted to know where my news sense had gotten lost. Then he sent out three other smart boys to do a good job on it.

The paper got out a special edition—and the troubles I had foreseen began. First, the government stepped in, trying to hush-hush the whole thing; but too late. The rush had started. For miles around the poor Prof's fenced-in hideaway, cars and trailers parked in a mad senseless jumble. People crowded against the fences and the electricity had to be shut off. Some smart aleck produced wire cutters and made an opening. The invasion of the new Eden had begun.

Stegner took flight, taking his secret apparatus and files with him. He declined police escort, and vanished from his mad Eden. Where he went was impossible to learn, but I supposed the government knew.

The area he had revitalized with his selective field was a nine days wonder, and after just about that long it was a tramped over, paper strewn, garbage littered wreck. The oversized animals and birds drifted away, the huge houseflies perished or were eaten by the birds. Apparently that was the end of the thing. Humanity had triumphed over its savior with its usual stupid interference.

A few of us remembered, could not put out of our minds the significance of what the old man had done. He had pointed the way to a lush immortality, and he had been shoved aside and pawed over and written about like some freak. If he had been a notorious criminal, he would have gotten far better journalistic treatment. But the years went by—four, five of them. And nothing more was heard of Stegner and his work. Until, one day coming home from a night shift on the paper, I found a letter in my box. It was a rather plain looking envelope, but much larger than the ordinary. The handwritten address was quite legible, but very big, as if a giant hand had cramped itself to produce ordinary script:

Dear old friend:

You may have forgotten me, but I do not forget you. If you would like to join me for a time, insert a

notice to Harry F in the personal column to that effect. I am trusting you to keep my secret.

Stegner

Needless to say, I inserted the notice.

A LIMOUSINE, driven by a noncommittal chauffeur, picked me up off a street corner, whisked me to the airfield. I boarded a plane piloted by a man I used to know as a fading stunt pilot—Harry Fredericks. The plane lifted and took a southerly course which presently changed to an easterly bearing. I looked below and saw we were over water.

We came down somewhere in South America and I got out of the plane as mystified as I'd entered it. Secrecy? Fredericks wouldn't even discuss the weather!

I had expected another Eden, hidden away from the world. But the land of brobdignags I found staggered me. Grasses, trying to be trees, and trees ...

There were no words for the bigness, the health and vitality of Stegner and the government bigwigs, who had welcomed him here in South America. But Stegner hustled me aside before I had time to do more than goggle at the mammoth layout of this new Eden under government supervision. He took me to his house, a huge thing built with huge hands, big enough to accommodate a man ten feet tall! Yes, Stegner was a giant! Everybody in that fantastic hideaway was a giant.

The second floor of the house overlooked a great, wide valley. Stegner pointed one great finger to the horizon and I looked. There was an endless fence out there. The same as in California, only more so. The natives of the valley, the Indios, the rancheros, the more intelligent animals, were trying to get in to the wonders they saw beyond that fence. And some of them were dying against the killing electric charges in its wires. Through a pair of glasses the Prof handed me, I saw that some of the dead were human.

"That's murder!" I gasped.

Stegner's voice held the sadness of a great and sorrowful god. "I am in a trap, my friend. I have pretended to acquiesce, but my cohorts are not fully deluded as to my loyalty to the thing they plan. These government men had gone mad with power. And the problem that now faces me seems insurmountable. The peoples of this world are too small, morally, for so big a life. I fear chaos. I thought that perhaps you, with your native shrewdness, might help me unlock this prison I am in, reconcile this Eden and its growth to the world that it must eventually overrun. It will overrun the planet, but I would prefer it not to be by violence as these mad men plan it. They have selfishly taken my gift to mankind to themselves, for their own aggrandizement."

I gulped. He thought I had the savvy to answer that one! "Hell, Prof. I thought you saw that from the first. I've often wondered when the blow-off would come. I'm a newspaperman; I know what goes on in the world. It isn't ready for such a life as you can give it—too much selfishness. This thing has so many angles, so many ways it can give private groups power."

"Then what can I do?"

"As long as this is going to be a fight, let's make it an even one, so that the chips aren't all on one side of the table. Then maybe there'll be a balance of power, a stalemate—such as existed between Russia and the U. S. A. for so long."

"You mean . . . ?"

"I mean let me get the hell out of here in a hurry, with the details of your processes, and let me spread them all over the world. Publicity can lick this thing. Your mistake was in building fences. Put up a fence, and somebody'll bust it."

"You are a wise man, my friend," he said.

"Then I'm making a run for it right now. They won't expect me to be dashing off before I've even taken off my hat. Give me *your formulae, and show me the back door."

"You can only leave by plane ..."

"Okay. I can fly one.' I had my own crate for several years until the finance company took it away from me. The airfield's right next to the house . . ."

He gave me the papers. "What's in 'em?" I asked.

"The formulae for the creation of the repellent anti-gravitational field which eliminates the age-factor element. I have been working on a growth inhibitor, but in secret. So I have had little time to develop it. Briefly, it is a method of making the field even more selective, leaving in the body those elements which have caused life to stop growing at adulthood, although it is not natural to stop growing. I am sure that any good scientist can finish my work. With this development, man can have his cake and eat it too. He won't grow to giantism as we are doing, yet his life and health will be prolonged."

"Why not just explain it to these men?"

He laughed bitterly. "They wish to use their gigantic size to conquer the world. They can do it, too. Their minds have increased in power. Growth is that way. But moral values are something different—they are acquired by experience. Find some moral men who might use this information to circumvent what is about to happen."

I took the papers and shook his gigantic hand. I left via the back door, and sneaked through a clump of giant ferns to the edge of the airfield. A little prowling revealed a parked plane, long unused because those who had flown it here had grown too big to use it. I waited, hidden in the lush greenery until the setting sun would hide my movements. It would only be a few minutes now...

The hangar in which the plane was parked contained several gasoline drums, the kind with pumps on them that worked with a crank. I got into the hangar, finally, and before it got too dark to see, checked the plane's gas gauge. It was about a quarter full. I connected the gas hose and started pumping. In twenty minutes I had her full, then I climbed into the plane ...

When the motor caught, after I was sure it never would, the thunder of the prop brought giants running toward me from the far end of the field, their twenty-foot strides eating up the distance. But I taxied straight toward them, giving the plane's motors all they would take. The plane roared down the field, and they fell flat as the prop came at them. The plane lifted, spun over them, was off. Now slugs from oversize rifles came buzzing about me, crashing through the fuselage. But it was dark and I was away. No serious damage had been done.

In Texas it took me four hours to get the brass to listen to me. Finally they did. They didn't ask me to keep my mouth shut. They just turned me loose. I went to my editor and told him the truth. He didn't believe me. When he checked with the army, they said I was obviously trying to perpetrate a hoax. I nearly got fired.

MONTHS went by, and I waited. I knew I'd have to wait until my chance came. There'd have to be hellfire before anybody'd believe my story. Then the storm broke, in sensational headlines. "Gigantic beasts wipe out town in South America."

My editor sent for me. He showed me the headline. "Maybe I made a mistake not believing your story about Stegner," he said. "I make a lot of mistakes."

"You want me to cover this?" I said.

"That's it. And if you can come up with proof of what you told me when you got back from that crazy trip, I'll print every damned word."

WHEN I GOT on the scene, I knew they were at last taking it seriously. The locals had called out the army to fight the strange monsters that were coming out of the jungle. They were such things as army ants six feet long; anteaters looking like ambling locomotives with hairy hides and noses; lumbering sloths vast as a houses on legs, sleepy and comic as ever, but terrifyingly destructive; jaguars like trucks and trailers; centipedes with stingers over their backs that would reach a man in a third-story window; wasps and bees like buzzards. The army was lashing at these things with machine guns, flame throwers, tanks and rockets. Jeeps careened across the landscape with loads of ammo. It was a madhouse on a vast scale, and being fought to the death. They waited for the beasts to come out of the jungle, then they jumped them—or were jumped. Nobody was allowed to fly into the hinterland to see where they were coming from. And when I tried to get officials to consider it, they absolutely refused. Up there, it was hinted, were secret government projects—besides they were too far away—and radio said there was no

sign of anything unusual there. It was worth even a general's job to poke his nose in near those projects. And how could I tell these people traitorous men of their own government were the culprits? It just wasn't possible—and because I had to stay on the scene, I never even hinted it. I merely waited my chance to produce proof. I knew I'd get it, sooner or later. Something would come out of that jungle I'd be able to use to convey the real menace to the knowledge of a puzzled world.

I wrote carefully, reporting the weird war with the animal world—and I kept inserting paragraphs hinting about Stegner and his growth field, adding "rumors" that maybe his work had been taken over by a power-mad clique and it was they who were loosing this horror.

My boss liked the stuff I was putting in, because it sold papers, and I was careful to keep my facts separate, and label my theories. Nobody—at least so it seemed—believed the theories, but they made good reading. I got a raise in salary.

Other reporters were knocking out stories as good as mine, but without the insight into the facts that I had. So their stories went too far afield. Mine became popular, and were in demand as reprints all over the world. But officially, nobody paid any attention to me, so the important papers nestled on the bottom of my trunk. I didn't want them confiscated until the time came when I could publish them with proof. My boss would back me up when that proof came. I was sure of that.

I got my chance the day the giantess came crashing out of the smoke and dust of the circle of horror across which the beasts were constantly lunging. She was near naked, and half mad with pain from the giant insects plaguing her. No one fired on her as she stood with uplifted arms, waiting for the soldiers to kill her as she expected. Beautiful as a goddess out of an ancient myth she came forward toward the soldiers, her face lighting with hope, her hair streaming golden in the sun. She spoke to us then, and the silence that came over the field of carnage was complete.

"Look at me! Look at me and believe! There are others like me, back in the jungle; mad giants who plan to conquer your world. They are ready to do it. I have escaped to warn you. They are mad, these giants my master has created. They are monsters. . ."

I recognized her now. My senses leaped and my blood pounded in my veins. Here was my opportunity to convince the world. This was Tilda, Stegner's maid! I snapped several pictures of her as she went on talking.

"These men, who were once your own leaders are plotting to destroy you and take the world for themselves. You do not know what they are preparing for you, but I come to tell you. Make ready, for they are on their way to destroy you. They bring huge guns, monster tanks that they have built, machines never before seen on earth."

What more she might have told we were never to know, for she fell then, at the end of her strength. Whatever she had dared, whatever she had gone through to break out of that monstrous circle and come to us, had been too much even for her giant's strength. She fell, like a tower crashing down, and lay there, a great lax pile of pink and red flesh, torn by thorns, the claws of animals, the stingers of terrible giant insects.

Then the monsters came again, and we could not go to her. She lay there as darkness came, and in the morning only her skeleton remained, stripped of flesh in the night by the myriad devouring giant ants and beetles.

MY STORY went in, with photos of Tilda. My editor printed the whole story, printed my formulae, printed every word of the history of Stegner and his creations, and the secret menace he had unwittingly loosed on the world from his second hidden Eden in the jungle. I was called home.

They came to me then, those moral ones Stegner had said existed. Men high in government and army circles who had the peace and welfare of the world at heart. Selfless ones whose records were above reproach. And they proved to be high in the powers of the world, able to command.

I WENT back to South America, to my reporting. I wanted to be on hand when the attack of which Tilda had warned became reality.

I was some twelve miles from the deadly circle when the giant tanks appeared. They were larger than

any moving thing ever seen on Earth before. Tracklayers, caterpillars—and swinging above them slender towers which bore ominous gleaming nozzles. On they came.

Then they struck at us. From the nozzles a cold brilliance leaped out, unnameable, that swept forward like a slow lightning, a kind of crackling sheet of cold fire that spread from tower to tower, in an arc that began to bend toward our lines.

The fire came in mile-wide swaths. There was no outcry, no terror—just the sweating lines of men in foxholes, the crews about the guns, heaving ammo into their maws; the rumbling trucks and the careening jeeps. The fire swept over all like radiance, like a pouring out of moonlight, soft but brilliant, mild yet deadly. Then it was gone. And when it had gone, nothing but silence remained. Dead men stretched out where they had lain waiting, fallen where they labored; jeeps careened on to crash into, stumps or bigger trucks—and stop forever. Only silence and death and nothingness was left.

When the silence swept across the whole front I dropped my glasses and lit out for my own car, and headed for the coast. I wanted to file this story in person, and I knew, too, that army would not be there in the morning. I meant to stay alive. I knew that the hope for mankind lay in what honest men were doing with Stegner's formulae. I had to know. So I fled.

Next day they were dropping atom bombs on every moving thing in Stegner's ghastly Eden. High flying bombers flew in swarms—and many of them were being shot down by the weird fire. I saw those atom bombs falling, on television, and the white radiance reaching up toward them. I saw it catch them in its embrace, saw them explode harmlessly in the air, midway in their plunge. Whatever the fire was, it was a defense against the atom bomb, for it exploded them before they could reach their targets.

It didn't catch them all, and it didn't intercept all the high-flying bombers loosing their guided rocket missiles. It got enough though, to show us we were on the losing end. What we needed was a miracle. And the miracle did occur...

At first, even with my fingers on every tag end of information that came out of the terrible area, it was an unnoticeable change. Then I got it. The men doing our fighting changed in caliber and ability. I never learned, due to the official habit of hushing everything up, just whose technology accomplished the miracle, but it must have been started from the first, with those army officers who had listened to me with such lack of interest when I spoke before their inquisition at the Texas army air field.

All I learned was that there was a new kind of man busy at the front, a man of keener intellect, swifter of action, infinitely more able than the former ordinary soldier.

It was Jake who first confirmed my suspicions. He brought in photographs of men lifting trucks out of mudholes, men tearing steel cables apart with their bare hands, men jumping over twenty-foot barriers with full pack. "Whatta I do with that kind of pic? The people are so fed up with the impossible news they are getting that they don't believe anything any more!

But you and I know a news camera doesn't lie . . . it doesn't have time!"

They had put the Prof's formulae to work against the giants. This time it was the right formulae. They had growth without increase in size, a growth of ability, of strength, of mentality, without any increase in ponderous structure. These new soldiers were the policemen of the United Nations made into supermen!

I began to believe in the human race again. "Great!" I said. "This is what I've been waiting for!"

Jake tossed me his pictures and went away. I turned to the typewriter and began batting out my story: "Mankind solves the problem of giantism! The new weapon against the giants is—the new man!"

Those little giants waded into that circle through all the deadly fire and the giant scorpions and vast beasts like Jack-the-Giant-Killer's multitudinous sons—and it wasn't a month later that I typed the last story of my life and gave up reporting for good. It was the tale of the death of the last giant and Jake's picture of him, armed in the end with only his fists, huge as a tree, mad with hunger and thirst and terrible fear of the little men who were just as mighty, a lot quicker, and every bit as smart as any giant. They routed him out with tear gas and shot him down with plain old GI rifle fire.

Yes, I gave up newspaper work. Why? They offered me a job making a movie out of the "War of the Giants". The job gave me quick money, which is what I needed. The wife and I are starting a new colony on Malino Island. It's in the Carolinas. We're going to try this growth-without-size business out properly.

Yes, that's my son. Eight months. He doesn't ordinarily go around dragging a piano—it just got in his way.

THE END