



I cautiously turned my head, looked up—and saw the killers on the ledge 25 feet above me, staring across at camp

The Opium Tiger

by FRED MEYER SCHRODER

AS TOLD TO ROBERT EASTON

I first heard about him at Indian Point on the Siberian coast opposite Alaska. It was shortly after the turn of the century, and my partners and I had put in there with our two-masted schooner, the Ralph J. Long, in search of sea-otter skins. We didn't find any, but we did hear of an enormous tiger that ranged out of the forests of Siberia, Manchuria, and northern Korea and followed the reindeer herds to the Arctic Circle.

Indian Point was a bleak collection of huts on a wind-swept promontory, and it was the last place in the world where I expected to hear about a tiger. It was perhaps because of the strange surroundings in which he was first described to me that the Siberian tiger became a kind of supernatural creature. Like most people, I'd never heard of a tiger north of India. Was he white like a polar bear? No, he was said to be marked like any other tiger. Did he molest men? He did. The idea of a great cat stalking through the forests of the north intrigued me.

In the fur trade in those days it was a good plan to go to the London fur auction every year to get an idea of the future demand. I went and I saw the only Siberian tiger skin offered for sale bring \$690—and those were Teddy Roosevelt dollars. Two dozen Indian tiger skins in the same sale brought \$25 apiece. The fur on the Siberian was four to five inches long and the guard hairs were an inch longer. It was big enough to wrap around a cow, but otherwise looked like any other tiger skin. When I went back to my rooms in the Thatch House Club I had a peculiar feeling that eventually I'd meet an animal that wore such a skin.

The Thatch House Club was unique. Between its two huge fireplaces, one at either end of the room, you were quite likely (continued on page 119)

Those huge Siberian cats had skunked me, scorned me, scared me. I had to avenge myself. But how?

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN McDERMOTT



THE OPIUM TIGER

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to see the King of England chatting with fellow members of the Arctic Brotherhood, or perhaps Major Burnham back from the Matabele Wars, or Colonel Cuninghame returned from the Yukon. It was there that I met Frederick Courtney Selous, a small, quiet man and perhaps the greatest hunter of those times or any times. He'd gone to Africa when they were still using elephant tusks for fences, and Rider Haggard, the novelist, had immortalized him as the white hunter Allan Quatermain. Teddy Roosevelt later used Selous as guide on his African safari.

"I envy you the chance," Selous said when I told him I hoped for a crack at the Siberian tiger. "But you ought to go around to the museum if you haven't seen one." At that time the Siberian tiger was a newcomer to the big-game lists and was rapidly taking his place at the head of them. The trans-Siberian railroad was invading his habitat, and we'd heard how his depredations stopped construction on the road.

I took Selous up on his suggestion and went to the museum. Sure enough, there stood the great Siberian side by side with his Indian cousin. Both measured 47 inches high at the shoulders and 13 feet long from nose to tail, but the Siberian weighed 580 pounds against the Indian's 360. One was built like a bulldog, broad-chested and bow-legged, and the other was lean and rangy as a greyhound. An ordinary tiger of 400 pounds is rare, and a lion of 500 pounds is phenomenal, but Siberian tigers weigh up to 700.

There are several varieties of tigers in Asia from Singapore to the Arctic Circle and Peking to Persia, and I've hunted practically all of them. The Siberian is the largest and warriest, has the worst reputation, and is everything the biggest cat in the world should be.

I returned to the Far East from London sure of what I was looking for. In 1903, as representative for Wilson & Company of London and Tientsin, I was fur-trading in Manchuria; and there, on a lonely spur of half-constructed railroad, I came a step nearer my ambition.

The railroad was being built by the Russians under franchise from the Chinese. The construction camp was in a clearing surrounded by dense woods, and my Mongol and Chinese boys and I reached it late one afternoon. As the watch fires were being lighted and the sentries were starting to patrol, I sat on a stump with the Cossack lieutenant who commanded the soldiers. The soldiers weren't guarding us against human enemies, since no nation was then at war with Russia or China. They were there to guard us against tigers.

As he sat beside me, his right arm in a sling, the lieutenant told me his story.

He said the troops had arrived from Russia a month previously under orders to guard railway workers against tigers. The whole business sounded like poppy-cock to him. None of the soldiers liked Siberian duty, and the last thing they wanted to do was take the

assignment seriously. A night or two after their arrival the lieutenant was sitting on a stump in the middle of camp, and the messboy was just about to hand him a plate of soup when his mouth dropped open and the plate slid from his hands.

"He was looking into the face of a tiger that had reared up behind me," the lieutenant said. "At the same instant I felt a killing pain in both shoulders and at the side of my neck. The tiger had clasped me with its paws and sunk his teeth into my shoulder. He dragged me away, conscious though nearly suffocated by his putrid breath, while my men stood by stupefied. He didn't hurry. He simply stalked off over the unfinished embankment, and would probably be going yet if my men hadn't come to their senses and fired a fusillade. Why they didn't kill me God only knows. The beast dropped me and jumped into the brush."

What bothered the lieutenant as much as his wounds was loss of face for being chosen by a tiger in preference to a native. Tigers normally prefer natives for there's supposed to be something about a white man that is distasteful to them—odor, perhaps. I've known Manchurian hunters who could smell a white man at 100 yards—the same distance at which they can smell a bear—and Selous told me that in Africa he'd known natives to detect a white man at distances up to half a mile when the wind was right. In this case the lieutenant had lost face for being considered no different from a coolie.

They used to say that for every tie laid on the trans-Siberian in that region a tiger carried off a man. It's an exaggeration, but there's some truth in it. The workers struck, not for higher wages or shorter hours, but for protection against tigers. I went looking for tigers that could do such things. I saw none, but I read an interesting story in a trail I followed.

A huge Manchurian bear had stopped at a spot in the forest, stamped the soft ground, champed his teeth, and tossed his head till foam flicked off on the bushes. It was still wet. A few yards farther along I saw where a tiger had crouched and imprinted his pugs deeply. They had been face to face—tiger and bear—and the tiger had turned.

What I saw pleased me. All I'd been hearing about the tigers suggested they had powers beyond nature, and since that's the way I was inclined to think about them anyway, they had almost got the better of me mentally. Later, whenever I began to feel that way, I'd recall the bear that had made the tiger turn aside. But the worst was yet to come.

One evening I saw wild-pig sign in a clearing and decided to investigate it next day. I was slipping along through the forest just at daylight, and as I drew close to the clearing I began to smell uprooted ground. The pigs were after hazelnuts and herbs such as ginseng, that special root much prized by the Chinese. At the Canton drug market in those days you could get almost

your own price for a ginseng root shaped like a man. It will keep old men young, the Orientals say. The pigs liked it too, and I could hear them rooting noisily as I eased forward.

I was making my way through a low growth of hazels when a great yellow shape exploded from under me. Tiger! I'd practically stepped on him. I was so flabbergasted I couldn't do anything for a minute but watch him cross the clearing in stiff-legged strides. It didn't take him long, striking right and left like a horse instead of bounding like a cat. I finally threw my rifle up and got off a snapshot, but it had no effect, and I was left feeling sick and sweating all over.

He'd been after the wild pigs, and it was his preference for them that sawed me—or was it my smell? Anyway, it was hard to take. I'd all but walked down his throat, and then I'd missed him. I began to feel luck was against me, but that was nothing compared with what I was to feel soon.

We were 150 miles north of the Amur River in Russian territory and were looking for gold. I was on my own this time, though later I came back into the region on behalf of the Guggenheims. Entering Siberia was no problem then; you simply got a visa from the nearest Russian consul and went in. I'd met a young Siberian Russian at Harbin, Manchuria, who agreed to guide me, and he and my native boys were with me. Late one afternoon we made camp in rolling country, chiefly grassland spotted here and there with clumps of woods. The campsite was under a bluff in a little hollow. While the boys were setting out camp I looked up at the bluff and thought I saw rays from the setting sun strike an outcropping of quartz, so I picked up a geologist's hammer and strolled over for a close look. The distance wasn't much farther than a city block, so it never occurred to me to take my rifle.

I'd chipped off a piece of rock and was examining it through a magnifying glass when a pebble fell from the top of the cliff. Something about that pebble made me wonder, and I turned my head cautiously and looked up. There on a ledge 25 feet above me was the front end of the biggest tiger I ever saw.

Only once before had I been so scared—when I was a boy in California and a lion jumped out of a tree and landed almost on top of me. I almost stampeded before I realized the tiger wasn't looking at me but at the camp. The noise and activity there—pans rattling, herdboy turning out the horses—seemed to fascinate him. I swear his head and shoulders were as big around as the end of an old-fashioned tobacco hogshead, and the brilliance of the late sun seemed to set his coat aflame. I hoped camp activities would hold him spellbound, but I knew that with the slightest change of wind, or a chance glance down, he would find me. One easy hop and he would be on top of me. I sat there, rock in one hand and magnifying glass in the other, and began to pray.

I hadn't got far when a second tiger appeared beside the first. This one was

slightly smaller, the female I guessed, and she also was looking at camp. I wondered if they'd never seen a camp before, or if, like the railroad tigers, they'd seen too many camps and were planning an attack.

Then a third tiger appeared. This was Junior, their half-grown son, a regular teen-age type. He swaggered out onto the ledge like he was some punkina, but I noticed he was careful to place Ma between him and the Old Man in case fireworks started.

Now there were three Siberian tigers breathing down my neck. Three? I mean five. Sister showed up, this year's cub, and right behind her came Buddy, her twin. Any second I expected them to troop down the bluff, swallow me as appetizer, and proceed to eat up the whole camp. I thought of shouting and trying to scare them. Sometimes tigers will run away when you surprise them, but I couldn't remember that anyone had ever surprised five at once. So I resumed my prayers. They must have done some good because soon, without a sound, Father withdrew and the others followed in order.

Back then I could do the 100-yard dash in 10.1 seconds. (Anyone who remembers Queen Victoria's birthday celebration in Dawson in '97 will remember the occasion.) But I know I broke 10 flat getting back to camp, and long before I reached it I was shouting for the herdboys to bring the horses and the others to grab their rifles.

We gave the tigers quite a chase, and once we saw them loping along in the distance. But it was too far for a shot, and they disappeared into some woods as darkness came on. I returned to Manchuria with one resolve: get one of those tigers.

Pressure of duties elsewhere, however, made it impossible for me to act on that resolve immediately. Time went by. But early in the summer of 1916, when I found myself back in Manchuria again, I went to see my friend Charles K. Moser, American consul in Harbin, and through him met Rostov, district superintendent for the Russian railroad. He was an enthusiastic hunter as well as a good fellow. I told him I had to have a tiger. The tigers had gone south, he said, due to a cholera epidemic which had cleaned out wild pigs in the north. "But talk to Tiger Smith before you do anything," Rostov suggested. "He'll know where the tigers are if anyone will."

I traveled on the railroad south toward Vladivostok and found Tiger Smith, an American and a true eccentric. He'd come to Manchuria, got a franchise for a sawmill, built the mill, and then something happened. I saw what it was. Tiger Smith's house was papered with tiger skins. His mill had long ago fallen into ruins. "Follow the pig," he said, "where you find pig you find tiger." I could tell he'd devoted his life to following the pig, and I can understand how the Manchurian forest—a mysterious place if there ever was one—could do that to a man.

I continued south to a point near the Korean border, and there my boys and

I took a narrow-gauge line up into the forest where the Russians were cutting firewood for their engines. They were felling the finest black walnut and oak, five and six feet on the stump, though there was plenty of coal in the country.

I carried a letter to the camp superintendent, a beefy young Russian, who did the honors. When the vodka was gone he said he'd send word through the woods that we wanted a tiger, and meanwhile here was some more vodka.

"At Vladivostok the officers hunt tigers," he said, "but here it's the other way around."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"The only people in the forest are opium outlaws. They'll bring us word in a day or two. They play a constant game of hide-and-seek with the tigers."

Sure enough, in a day or two one of the outlaws came hurrying into camp highly excited. He was a poor, emaciated fellow unable to make a living by the usual Manchurian combination of farming and banditry, or perhaps he'd fallen afoul of the law, and so he'd taken to the woods to engage in the forbidden cultivation of the opium poppy. Opium was banned throughout Chinese dominions at this time, but Manchurian or black opium commanded a high price. So if a man didn't consume too much of his product, he could make a nice living—if the tigers let him.

Our opium outlaw was dressed in one piece of denim that came to his knees. His long hair was pieced out with string to comply with the law requiring every Chinese to wear a pigtail, and his feet and head were bare.

"Master, a tiger was in my poppy patch last night."

"Where is he now?"

"He killed a rascally pig that was uprooting my poppies and dragged it into the brush. I think he is still there."

"How far?"

"Six li."

"You know this tiger?"

"Oh yes. A big one. He also eats the long pig (man). At night he comes and I sit in my house while he prowls, and I pull strings to rattle the noise-makers in the patch, and I light fire-crackers, but he does not go away."

"You have friends to help us?"

"They are waiting."

He led us through the woods for a couple of miles to a clearing where his log-sod hovel stood and his poppies were blooming. They were a beautiful sight, four and five feet high, surrounded by green woods. Every day during the harvest season the outlaw would slit the poppy pods delicately, making a spiral incision that allowed a drop of juice to collect at the bottom. That was the opium.

The swathe the tiger had made through the poppies while dragging off the pig was plain. We followed it to where it entered the woods and found two more opium outlaws like our guide, armed with stick rattles and cans full of rocks. Then we proceeded on the trail.

The tiger's carcass would be a rich reward for these fellows. They'd sell

it to apothecaries, who would convert it into bag medicine. He who partakes of the tiger acquires the characteristics of the tiger, many Chinese believe.

It was nearly noon, and hot. There was no wind, only treacherously veering air currents that seem to spring from nowhere. The light was also deceiving. Now and then the leaves stirred and shifted the pattern of shadows on the undergrowth. There were many flies, but I was glad of that. Flies are helpful when you're stalking a tiger by daylight.

Soon the trail disappeared into a large patch of brush interspersed with

All in a Lifetime

Fred Meyer Schroder's adventures began early. As he related in "Never Say Uncle" (OUTDOOR LIFE, July 1933), his father was murdered by horse thieves and he came into the world a posthumous child destined for a career of excitement.

Born in Charleston, S. C., he grew up on a California ranch near the Mexican border, punched cattle in Sonora, Mexico, and took part in revolutions as far south as Chile. He hit Alaska in 1898, spent most of the next 10 years sourdoughing gold strikes, took enough time out for a trip to London to sell Yukon gold stocks.

He hunted sea otters in the Aleutians, crossed Borneo on foot prospecting for hardwood, shot tigers in India and Manchuria, served as staff officer to Sun Yat-sen during the Chinese revolution of 1912, was instrumental in bringing about the Mongolian revolt from China, took a 1,000-camel caravan to Siberia with Red Cross supplies for prisoners of war, acted as a secret agent for our State Department, and was blinded by mustard gas in front of St. Petersburg while fighting Germans on the Russian side in World War I.

Schroder, hale and hearty at 94, now lives in Oakland, Calif.—one of the last of a great breed of soldiers of fortune, big-game hunters, and adventurers.

trees. I started around it, leaving the others where they were, but after circling half a mile found no outgoing sign. The tiger must be in there.

I knew that when a tiger has eaten well he sleeps, so the odds were even that I could sneak up to him. I moved to a point that momentarily took advantage of the air currents, posted my boys and the outlaws right and left at intervals, and gave instructions to turn the beast my way if he came out. Then I started after him.

I carried the double-barreled .450 Express, custom-made in London, that I preferred for tigers. The breakdown mechanism was so finely tooled that the rifle all but opened by itself at the right time. And I wore canvas sneakers, the nearest things to the Indian moccasins I used to wear as a boy on our Cuyamaca Mountains ranch in San Diego County, Calif. There's where Yaqui

Tom, a full-blooded Indian, taught me to move quietly.

I went a step at a time, parting the grass and twigs carefully, and keeping my eyes open. I wasn't looking for tiger right then, strange as it may seem. I was looking for a swarm of flies. I knew that if I saw one it would mark the place where the tiger lay with his kill. If the flies hovered steadily it would indicate the tiger was probably asleep. If they rose and fell, as if blown by a draft, it probably would indicate he was awake and was swatting them with his paw.

Suddenly I came under attack from an unexpected quarter. Some small black flies—like our American deer flies—had been bothersome all morning, but now they became a mortal menace. They struck unerringly at the back of my neck, the backs of my legs, and at every place I was least protected, and I couldn't risk a move in self-defense. It was hell.

But I'd gone ahead perhaps 100 yards, and had taken about an hour doing it, when I saw something that made me forget black flies and everything else except my mission.

Not over 30 yards away on my right was a swarm of flies—the swarm I'd been looking for. I'd nearly gone right by it, and I'd almost put myself up-wind from the tiger—never a wise thing to do no matter how soundly the beast is sleeping. I watched the flies for 10 or 15 minutes. They did not rise or fall once, but just hovered steadily in tight formation.

Should I back-track and come at the tiger with the wind more favorable? Or should I risk taking him as he lay? The pesky black flies made up my mind for me. They were eating me alive. I couldn't stand it any longer, and decided to take him right then.

I took 10 steps in the direction of the tiger. Another 20 would put me beside him. The swarm of flies still hovered steadily. I made myself resist the temptation to look around, and it was well that I did. For in a fraction of a second the head and shoulders of a tiger shot up amid the flies. The sight of him almost took my breath away.

The killer crouched there sideways to me, head up, snuffing. The wind had brought him news of me, but I didn't give him time to think much about it. I let him have the .450 through the point of the shoulder.

He shot eight or 10 feet straight up into the air, came down turning back somersaults, and thrashed around in the undergrowth so close to me I had to stop back to give him room. But I knew from the way he'd been crouching when I fired that the bullet would penetrate his heart and part of his lungs, and that he'd be dead almost before he left the ground.

He measured an inch under 12 feet, and I judged his weight at 550 pounds. As I looked down at him I felt avenged for the one that had scorned me in favor of the wild pigs, and also for the horrible scare those five had given me when I stood under the ledge north of the Amur.

myself upwind from a tiger. I watched it intently for perhaps half an hour. It hovered steadily. That meant he was asleep. I watched for another twenty minutes to be sure.

So far so good. But the treacherous wind was unfavorable. Should I backtrack and come around with it more in my face, or should I risk tackling him from where I stood? My flies decided me—they were literally eating me up. I couldn't stand the thought of another hour's exposure to their torture.

So I moved toward him a step at a time, keeping my eyes on his flies. After ten steps, they still hovered undisturbed. Ten more steps would put me practically in bed with him—if in fact he was still there. The thought ran through my mind that perhaps they were hovering over nothing but a dead pig. Perhaps he'd slipped away. Perhaps he was stalking me. I had to resist a temptation to look behind me. It was a good thing I did.

A tiger's head and shoulders had shot up in profile amid the fly swarm. Again I was looking at close range at those very orange, very black, very white markings.

I didn't contemplate them for long. His nose was up. He'd had news of me but couldn't tell just where it was coming from.

I could see the point of his shoulder as he crouched sidewise to me. As my bullet hit he went straight into the air clawing and squalling, came down and began doing backward somersaults. I had to step aside to give him room. But from the way he'd been sitting, I knew my bullet would have penetrated his heart and lungs and that he would for all practical purposes be dead before he left the ground.

He measured an inch over eleven feet from tip of nose to tip of tail. We judged his weight at 550 pounds. His skin became one of the most admired decorations of our Kalgan bungalow.