



Chapter 2: Certain Southern Butterflies

I had not expected to find a zebra so far north, yet he galloped by the door one torrid day showing his black and yellow stripes most tantalizingly. He was so near that the brilliant red dots which are a part of his color scheme showed plainly and added to his beauty. I have said galloped; I might better perhaps have written loped in describing his flight, for the zebra of this story is not a quadruped, but a butterfly. It was I who did the galloping, net in hand, finding his easy lope hard to rival in speed. Soon, however, he fluttered to a live-oak branch and lighted while I put the net over him, or thought I did. I hauled him in with careful glee only to find a yellow oak leaf as my prize and the butterfly nowhere to be seen. Down here many people call the *Heliconius charitonus* "the convict." I had thought this because of his stripes. I begin to think it is because of his ability to escape imprisonment. The zebra came as a sort of climax to two or three days of butterfly hunting extraordinary.

The first came on my first full day at Orange Park. There are years when August lasts well into November in northern Florida, and this is one. For two months, up to and including the tenth of November, there has been no rain, and in cloudless skies the fervent sun has set the mercury in the thermometer toying with the eighty mark. So it was on this first day of mine. The wind blew gently from the south, and by nine o'clock countless swarms of butterflies were flying against it, a vast migration in progress toward the tip of the peninsula.

The principal street of the town runs east and west from the boat landing to the railroad station. It is laid out so wide that the wagon tracks rather get lost in it and wander uncertainly from side to side, so wide that it takes three rows of stately, moss-bearded oaks to shade it, two between the broad sidewalks and the street, a third down the middle. There is room for a



trolley line each side of this central row and plenty of space for a city's wagon traffic between that and the sidewalk. The trolley line is not here, however. Only an occasional lazy horse scuffs through the sand. Somebody planned Orange Park for a metropolis, and it may be that yet, but the time has been long in coming.



But if human traffic was scarce in this street the butterfly highway which led across it anywhere east or west was filled with eager motion. Black, yellow, red, silver, and orange and gold little and big, they were in the air all the time.

The only effort necessary to collect specimens in variety was that of standing, net in hand, in any spot and taking what came within reach. Long-tailed skippers shot like buzzing black bullets out of the vivid sunshine to northward, under the flickering shadow of the live-oaks, and over the paling and through the vivid sunshine to southward again. The skipper is really dark brown, lighted with a few yellow spots, his body prettily furred with green, but he looks black on the wing. He is only a little fellow, spreading little more than an inch and a half from tip to tip, the long tails of his after-wings being his most conspicuous mark, but he is as hot footed in his motions as a Northern white-faced hornet.

Why a butterfly whose main colors are dark brown and green evolves from the red-headed yellow worm that feeds upon wistaria, pea vines and various other plants of the pulse family is not for me to say I think but little of the worm, but I have a great admiration for the skipper. His flight is vivid, if his coloring is not, and he is as full of energy and enthusiasm as a newly arrived Northern real-estate agent. I shall always feel a special friendship for Eudamus proteus. He was my first Florida capture. In the cool of dawn I found one sitting on the pillow of my bed that very first morning and I took him on the spot. It is a good butterfly country where new specimens come to you while you sleep.

To-day the sky is overcast, there is a hint of rain in the air and the temperature is low enough to suggest a sweater. Not a butterfly is in sight. All are under shelter, waiting for the sun and the warmth again.

Certainly millions of them must have passed through Orange Park on this day of which I write. There was not a moment from nine until four that I could not count a score crossing the main street. I wandered from the river bank to the railroad station, a matter of a mile,



and always it was the same. In the length and breadth of the town a thousand a minute must have moved on across that street, all day long. There were eddies and swirls in the current, but during the day I saw only one butterfly going against it. That was a skipper, and by his rate of movement I fancy he had forgotten something and was just hurrying back after it.

One of the eddies in this current was over a sweet potato field just south of the road. The ancient ditty about the grasshopper sitting on the sweet potato vine is true enough these days. The long drought has bred him in numbers, but that day the golden yellow butterflies rather crowded him off. The Florida sweet potato is delicious. There is a nice golden yellow taste to its well-cooked pulp that crosses the word “enough” out of a Northerner’s gastronomic dictionary. I remember as a boy studying history unwillingly, yet reading with pleasure of the part taken by the Southern troops under Marion, “the swamp fox,” in defying the British under Tarleton and thus helping win the war of the Revolution. The legend ran that an embassy of British officers came to Marion’s camp to discuss certain matters with them and found them making a meal of sweet potatoes only. Whereupon the embassy went back and told Tarleton that he could never conquer men who could fight so well on so meager a diet. At the time I sympathized with Marion and his men. Now, having tasted the Southern sweet potato in its native wilds, I sympathize with the British who did not know how well fed their enemies were.

The vine is not so delicious as all this, but it is pretty in its way, being much like our Northern morning glory. In fact, they are both ipomoeas, and the purple, tubular blossoms are almost identical. The Northern morning glory should take shame to itself that it does not grow a root like that of its Southern sister-in-law. This sweet potato field was dotted with purple blossoms that morning, and above them whirled swarms of what I think is really the loveliest butterfly of the South, the cloudless sulphur. The little sulphur with the black-bordered wings is common enough at the North, as it is down here, and a very pretty butterfly it is, too, but it pales into insignificance beside this great lemon-yellow fellow with wing expanse of two and a half inches, the whole upper side one rich clear color that flashes in the sun. The under side is almost as rich, having but one or two insignificant eye spots to vary it, and the swarms of these great golden creatures came down on the purple blossoms like a scurrying snow-storm whose great flakes were embodied sunshine.

The caterpillar which is the grub form of this beautiful creature is yellow, too—I cannot think of *Catopsilia eubule* as being born of a grub of any other color—and feeds on the leaves of the wild senna, whose blossoms are also yellow. Thus, for once, anyway, we have a



sequence of color culminating in the superlatives. The cloudless sulphur is very fond of all flowers, and is said to be especially partial to orange blossoms. I can think of nothing more beautiful than the glossy green leaves of this delightful tree, interspersed with the waxy white fragrant blooms, the whole glorified with the hovering wings of this great golden yellow butterfly.

The cloudless sulphurs did not have the sweet potato patch all to themselves, though they swirled there most conspicuously. I picked out of it, as I watched, occasional flecks of deep red which I took at first for monarchs, and so many of them were. The monarch is a common butterfly in the North, one of our most conspicuous varieties from early summer until the low swung sun beckons them South, whither they migrate in accumulating swarms from September until frost. In Massachusetts these migrations never contain enough members to make them conspicuous. Farther south the numbers increase until from New Jersey south we hear almost yearly accounts of the swarms. I took one of these monarchs as he sailed by me across the Orange Park boulevard. He was just *Anosia plexippus*, but such a splendid fellow! Never before had I seen a butterfly of this species quite so large or so richly colored. There was a velvety quality about all his markings and a sumptuousness of outline and development that made him far superior to the Northern monarchs which I have examined closely. Other specimens have confirmed this impression, and I begin to think that the Southern-born *Anosia plexippus*, developing under stronger sun and from a chrysalis unchilled by frost, excels in beauty his Northern brother. I wonder if other butterfly hunters can confirm or disprove this.

Along with the monarch came now and then the viceroy. This too is a common enough Northern butterfly, so much like the monarch, though of another genus, that in flight neither I nor the insect-eating birds are likely to tell the two apart. The monarch is beautiful but not tasty, and the insect-eaters let him fly by on this account. Something about him does not agree with them. On the other hand, *Basilarchia disippus*, the viceroy, is delectable from the flycatcher's point of taste. But he escapes because he resembles the monarch. Hence many scientists say that the viceroy "imitates" the monarch for protection. In this I take it that they mean that he escapes because he resembles, not that he consciously assumes the colors of the other insect. The survival of the fittest works inexorably, but without the consciousness of the individual. At any rate, the viceroy resembles the monarch very closely, though as a rule he is not so large.

The magnificence of the Florida monarch I find somewhat reflected in his viceroy,



nevertheless, for the Florida viceroys seem to me larger and more richly colored than those of New England. This difference has led one authority on Southern butterflies to adopt a new name for this dissembler, calling the local *Basilarchia disippus*, *Basilarchia floridensis*. Then another came along and called him *Basilarchia eros*. But why? The insect is in all respects the same as the *disippus* except that he is a wee bit bigger and richer in coloration. But so, I believe, is the monarch, down here. It seems to me like classifying Bill Jones as of a different family from his brother Sam Jones, just because Bill has browner whiskers and weighs forty pounds more.

But while I captured and examined monarchs and viceroys and released them with vain speculations as to what other people thought of them and why, *Dione vanillae* came along, and away went thoughts of potentates and of hair-splitting classifiers. She soared low as if to alight at my feet, and I saw the rich orange yellow of the upper sides of her aristocratic wings. She hovered and danced up by my eyes, and she seemed robed in shimmering silver, so profusely are the metallic moons scattered over her under wings, and through it all she seemed to blush a vivid red.

This butterfly I had never seen, and though for two or three days she and her bewitching sisters seemed to swarm I have not yet disentangled my soul from her fascinations. No one of the dancing sisterhood passes me but I pursue with the net for the joy of looking closely at so beautiful a creature, though I handle with tenderness and release after gloating. The lovely, fulvous orange which marks the fritillaries seems in *Dione* to be just a shade richer, but toward the bases of the wings it blushes into a rich wine red, a pellucid crimson, while beneath, the after wings are as studded with glittering silver spots as a Nautch girl with silver bangles. I do not wonder that *Dione* soars demurely for only a moment, then seems to have to dance in pure abandonment of joy in her own dainty, beautiful completeness. I have said the cloudless sulphur is the loveliest of Southern butterflies, and in spite of temptation I cling to the statement, but *Dione vanillae* is the most bewitching.

Of the other varieties of demure, delightful, sedate, serene, fascinating or frivolous butterflies that passed within reach of my net as I simply stood and watched them that most wonderful day I might name a dozen. The numbers, of all varieties, were countless, and all were moving south. I do not think it a conscious migration. Yet it has all the effect of that. A butterfly, like a migrating bird, flies best against a gentle wind. It is time now for the first of the wild geese to be on their way down from the Arctic, flying and feeding across the Northern States. You will find them feeding or resting when the wind is out of the north.



When it blows in the higher atmosphere from the south the long harrows breast it with ease, high up, and seem to make their way as rapidly and as far as possible while it lasts.

On days when the wind blows from the north down here there is a bit of the northern chill in the air. No more than enough to give a needed stimulus to a Northern man, to make him wish to tramp far and see all things, but to the Southern sun-born butterfly this chill spells no thoroughfare. All traffic is suspended on such days, and though in sunny sheltered corners you may find many or all varieties, only such vigorous fellows as the monarchs fly high or far. In other words, on sunny days with a southern wind there is a steady southward migration of all strong-winged butterflies, a movement that sends literally thousands upon thousands in the course of a day across miles of country. This is not conscious or purposeful migration as is the movement of the birds at this time of year, but the aggregate result is much the same. Nor is the rate of passage of individuals at all slow. I find when I sweep at one of these southbound fellows with the net and then, missing him, attempt to follow his flight, I migrate southward at a jog trot that would mean five or six miles an hour. The butterflies that started out earliest on that sunny November morning were a dozen miles nearer the head-waters of the St. Johns when the chill of late-afternoon overtook them.

I have named the, to me, loveliest and most fascinating of these November migrants. So far I have found two others most interesting. One of these is *Anosia berenice*, which, according to my reading of butterfly authorities, has no business here at all. *Berenice*, surnamed the queen, is of the same genus as the monarch, the only other species of the genus found in the United States. The color is a livid brown, not differing much from that of the monarch to the casual glance. The white spots on the wings are similarly placed but the black veining is absent on the upper sides.

I had supposed the queen was found only in the southwest, in Arizona and New Mexico, and was greatly delighted to find many specimens floating about, feeding on the same blossoms as the monarch, and in many ways seeming worthy to be a consort. Like *Anosia plexippus*, *Anosia berenice* has some quality which makes insect-eating birds shun it. In the southwest *Basilarchia hulsti* mimics the queen as the viceroy mimics the monarch. The two mimics are quite similar in appearance, and I shall look with care at each viceroy which passes in hopes of finding him the imitator of the queen.

The other most interesting variety is the zebra. In shape this insect differs from all the other butterflies found here, or indeed in the eastern United States. His wings are long and narrow, giving him somewhat the appearance of a gaudily painted dragon fly. But his flight



is serene and seemingly slow. It was two days after his disappearance before I saw him again, and then I did not recognize him. The richly contrasting black and gold of his upper side I did not then see, for he floated above me. I only knew that here was a peculiarly shaped brown fellow going easily by. This time he was easily captured. Not till I had him in the net did I see his upper side and recognize my escaped convict.

