

Hybrids and Mongrels compared, independently of their fertility.

Independently of the question of fertility, the offspring of species and of varieties when crossed may be compared in several other respects. Gärtner, whose strong wish it was to draw a distinct line between species and varieties, could find very few, and, as it seems to me, quite unimportant differences between the so-called hybrid offspring of species, and the so-called mongrel offspring of varieties. And, on the other hand, they agree most closely in many important respects.

I shall here discuss this subject with extreme brevity. The most important distinction is, that in the first generation mongrels are more variable than hybrids; but Gärtner admits that hybrids from species which have long been cultivated are often variable in the first generation; and I have myself seen striking instances of this fact. Gärtner further admits that hybrids between very closely allied species are more variable than those from very distinct species; and this shows that the difference in the degree of variability graduates away. When mongrels and the more fertile hybrids are propagated for several generations, an extreme amount of variability in the offspring in both cases is notorious; but some few instances of both hybrids and mongrels long retaining a uniform character could be given. The variability, however, in the successive generations of mongrels is, perhaps, greater than in hybrids.

This greater variability in mongrels than in hybrids does not seem at all surprising. For the parents of mongrels are varieties, and mostly domestic varieties (very few experiments having been tried on natural varieties), and this implies that there has been recent variability; which would often continue and would augment that arising from the act of crossing. The slight variability of hybrids in the first generation, in contrast with that in the succeeding generations, is a curious fact and deserves attention. For it bears on the view which I have taken of one of the causes of ordinary variability; namely, that the reproductive system, from being eminently sensitive to changed conditions of life, fails under these circumstances to perform its proper function of producing offspring closely similar in all respects to the parent-form. Now, hybrids in the first generation are descended from species (excluding those long cultivated) which have not had their reproductive systems in any way affected, and they are not variable; but hybrids themselves have their reproductive systems seriously affected, and their descendants are highly variable.

But to return to our comparison of mongrels and hybrids: Gärtner states that mongrels are more liable than hybrids to revert to either parent form; but this, if it be true, is certainly only a difference in degree. Moreover, Gärtner expressly states that the hybrids from long cultivated plants are more subject to reversion than hybrids from species in their natural state; and this probably explains the singular difference in the results arrived at by different observers. Thus Max Wichura doubts whether hybrids ever revert to their parent forms, and he experimented on uncultivated species of willows, while Naudin, on the other hand, insists in the strongest terms on the almost universal tendency to reversion in hybrids, and he experimented chiefly on cultivated plants. Gärtner further states that when any two species, although most closely allied to each other, are crossed with a third species, the hybrids are widely different from each other; whereas if two very distinct varieties of one species are crossed with another species, the hybrids do not differ much. But this conclusion, as far as I can make out, is founded on a single experiment; and seems directly opposed to the results of several experiments made by Kölreuter.

Such alone are the unimportant differences which Gärtner is able to point out between hybrid and mongrel plants. On the other hand, the degrees and kinds of resemblance in mongrels and in hybrids to their respective parents, more especially in hybrids produced from nearly related species, follow, according to Gärtner the same laws. When two species are crossed, one has sometimes a prepotent power of impressing its likeness on the hybrid. So I believe it to be with varieties of plants; and with animals, one variety certainly often has this prepotent power over another variety. Hybrid plants produced from a reciprocal cross generally resemble each other closely, and so it is with mongrel plants from a reciprocal cross. Both hybrids and mongrels can be reduced to either pure parent form, by repeated crosses in successive generations with either parent.

These several remarks are apparently applicable to animals; but the subject is here much complicated, partly owing to the existence of secondary sexual characters; but more especially owing to prepotency in transmitting likeness running more strongly in one sex than in the other, both when one species is crossed with another and when one variety is crossed with another variety. For instance, I think those authors are right who maintain that the ass has a prepotent power over the horse, so that both the mule and the hinny resemble more closely the ass than the horse; but that the prepotency runs more strongly in the male than in the female ass, so that the mule, which is an offspring of the male ass and mare, is more like an ass than is the hinny, which is the offspring of the female-ass and stallion.

Much stress has been laid by some authors on the supposed fact, that it is only with mongrels that the offspring are not intermediate in character, but closely resemble one of their parents; but this does sometimes occur with hybrids, yet I grant much less frequently than with mongrels. Looking to the cases which I have collected of cross-bred animals closely resembling one parent, the resemblances seem chiefly confined to characters almost monstrous in their nature, and which have suddenly appeared — such as albinism, melanism, deficiency of tail or horns, or additional fingers and toes; and do not relate to characters which have been slowly acquired through selection. A tendency to sudden reversions to the perfect character of either parent would, also, be much more likely to occur with mongrels, which are descended from varieties often suddenly produced and semi-monstrous in character, than with hybrids, which are descended from species slowly and naturally produced. On the whole, I entirely agree with Dr. Prosper Lucas, who, after arranging an enormous body of facts with respect to animals, comes to the conclusion that the laws of resemblance of the child to its parents are the same, whether the two parents differ little or much from each other, namely, in the union of individuals of the same variety, or of different varieties, or of distinct species.

Independently of the question of fertility and sterility, in all other respects there seems to be a general and close similarity in the offspring of crossed species, and of crossed varieties. If we look at species as having been specially created, and at varieties as having been produced by secondary laws, this similarity would be an astonishing fact. But it harmonises perfectly with the view that there is no essential distinction between species and varieties.