

their cages, which instead are filled with human beings. The Bear then leads them to meet Mary Poppins and an ancient Hamadryad (or king cobra), who is the lord of the animal world, "the wisest and most terrible of us all," the Bear tells them. The Hamadryad then gives Mary Poppins a birthday present, one of his own skins, on which he has written a greeting. Then he says he hears the signal for the Grand Chain, and he leads the children to a huge green square in the center of the zoo.

"As they drew nearer they could hear the animals singing and shouting, and presently they saw leopards and lions, beavers, camels, bears, cranes, antelopes and many others all forming themselves into a ring round Mary Poppins. Then the animals began to move, wildly crying their Jungle songs, prancing in and out of the ring, and exchanging hand and wing as they went as dancers do the Grand Chain of the Lancers." That Chain is "a figure in formation dances, such as the lancers and Scottish reels, in which couples split up and move around in a circle in opposite directions, passing all other dancers until reaching their original partners" (*Collins English Dictionary*). It is a stately, solemn dance in which the dancers salute and bow to one another as they pass each other, a dance originally performed by military groups with lances in hand.

The Hamadryad explains that creatures that normally prey on each other do not do so on the Birthday: "Even I ... can meet a Barnacle goose without any thought of dinner - on this occasion. And after all, ... it may be that to eat and be eaten are the same thing in the end. My wisdom tells me that this is probably so." That may seem like a shocking statement, but actually it is a reference to one of the Gnostic Gospels, the Acts of John, which tells of a dance and song done by Jesus and his disciples before going to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus foretold the events of his coming crucifixion. Here is part of that Gospel, as translated by G. R. S. Mead:

"... he gathered all of us together and said: / Before I am delivered up unto them let us sing a hymn to the Father, / and so go forth to that which lieth before us. / He bade us therefore make as it were a ring, / holding one another's hands, / and himself standing in the midst he said: / Answer Amen unto me. / He began, then, to sing a hymn and to say: / Glory be to thee, Father. / And we, going about in a ring, answered him: / Amen. ... I would be saved, and I would save. / Amen. / I would be loosed, and I would loose. /