

In a museum in Philadelphia, the narrator watches as an attendant is explaining the difference between poisonous and harmless snakes to a class of city school kids. To demonstrate his point, he drapes a grass snake around the elderly teacher's neck who is clearly terrified.

He turned to the teacher. "Now, Miss—Mrs.—" he said.

"Miss Aitcheson."

He lowered his voice. "The best way to get through to the children is to start with the teacher," he said to Miss Aitcheson. "If they see you're not afraid, then they won't be."

She must be near retiring age, I thought. A city woman. Never handled a snake in her life. Her face was pale. She just managed to drag the fear from her eyes to some place in their depths, where it lurked like a dark stain. Surely the attendant and the children noticed?

"It's harmless," the attendant said. He'd worked with snakes for years.

Her eyes faced the lighted exit. I saw her fear. The exit light blinked, hooded. The children, none of whom had ever touched a live snake, were sitting hushed, waiting for the drama to begin; one or two looked afraid as the attendant withdrew a green snake about three feet long from the basket and with a swift movement, before the teacher could protest, draped it around her neck and stepped back, admiring and satisfied.

"There," he said to the class. "Your teacher has a snake around her neck and she's not afraid."

Miss Aitcheson stood rigid; she seemed to be holding her breath.

"Teacher's not afraid, are you?" the attendant persisted. He leaned forward, pronouncing the judgement on her, whilst she suddenly jerked her head and lifted her arms in panic to get rid of the snake. Then, seeing the children watching her, she whispered, "No, I'm not afraid. Of course not." She looked around her.

"Of course not," she repeated sharply.

I could see her defeat and helplessness. The attendant seemed unaware, as if his perception had grown a reptilian covering...

"See, Miss Aitcheson's touching the snake. She's not afraid at all."

As everyone watched, she touched the snake. Her fingers recoiled. She touched it again.

"See, she's not afraid. Miss Aitcheson can stand there with a beautiful snake around her neck and touch it and stroke it and not be afraid."

The faces of the children were full of admiration for the teacher's bravery, and yet there was a cruelly persistent tension; they were waiting, waiting.

Full text can be found here:

<https://byuis.brainhoney.com/Resource/11236525,1,0/Assets/Media/PDF/YouAreNowEnteringTheHumanHeart.pdf>