

Touchable
By Les Scott and Robert W. Tracey
Arco Publishing Company, New York, 1951

Small-town girl Ruth loses herself in The Inferno (the Big City) and lesbianism, prostitution, degradation, absinthe, marijuana, coke and heroin (here known as The White Fairy) find her. A fine example of the bestselling author Les Scott's over the top pre-softcore era portrayals of sex and drugs in post-WWII America. In late 1952, another of his sex and drugs sagas would gain the attention of the Gathings Select House Committee investigating literature it considered a danger to America.

The blurb on the inside jacket:

TOUCHABLE

by Les Scott

Every day they come, these fresh-faced, eager girls from the small towns, the hills, the prairies; some fired with ambition, some wishing to get away from intolerable home conditions. And the *inferno* that is the great city swallows them. Some triumph over the *inferno*, attain security, even outstanding success. But many are lost in the struggle. Many end up the hopeless victims of bitter disillusionment, drifting aimlessly on the murky currents, forgotten, unheeded, looked upon with contempt instead of pity.

This story does not paint a pretty picture, but it paints a true one. The events are not exaggerated. They are founded on fact. Fictionalized only enough to make them readable. Such things can't happen ? The answer is, they do.

From young Arch Rader, Ruth learned of passion. From Blackie Dawson she learned of love. From Mike the bartender, she learned of bestial lust, and its unexplainable allure. From Tony the lesbian, she learned of the strange, exotic, frightening fascination of abnormal relations. From Bruno the pimp, she learned of the utter depths of degradation. From Clare, she learned of the terror, the hopeless despair of dope. And when the *inferno* had her helpless in its grip, she learned that there are men in the great city who can be kindly, tolerant, understanding, and ready with a helping hand. And at the last, she learned of the possibility of redemption, from - herself !

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Page 92-97: Our heroine tries absinthe for the first time...and one thing leads to another:

A girl sitting at the bar got off her stool and sauntered over to Ruth's table. She was smartly dressed and more than passably good-looking. Her cheek bones were high and she had keen, calculating eyes.

"Hello, kid," she greeted. "What's the matter? You look like you've had a warm time."

"It's nothing," Ruth replied. "Just a little trouble. I'm all right."

The girl dropped into a vacant chair. "Don't mind, do you? Thanks. What are you drinking, Scotch? That's no good. I'll get you a drink that will quiet your nerves."

She ignored Ruth's protest, beckoned a waiter and whispered something to him. The waiter nodded and hurried off. He returned a few minutes later with a glass containing a pale green liqueur.

"That'll fix you up in a hurry," said the girl. "I'm Tony. I work at one of the clubs uptown. Specialty dances. Put it down, kid, not too fast. Just what you need."

Ruth murmured a word of thanks and sipped the drink. It had an exotic bitter-sweet taste but was warm and comforting. Tony sat smoking a cigarette and watching her through narrowed lids.

As soon as Ruth's glass was empty, the waiter placed a full one before her.

"Feeling better?" Tony asked.

"Yes. What is this stuff?"

"Absinthe."

"Absinthe?"

"Yes. And the real stuff. Not colored anisette. You can't get it over the bar. Nor any other way, if you're not known to be right. All kinds of laws against it."

"Why?"

Tony shrugged. "Because some damn fools make bigger damn fools of themselves with it. A little bit of it is wonderful. But too much, or taken steadily, makes you crazy. It's like everything else. Handle it right and it does you no harm. But too damn few people can handle anything right. I've a notion you've found that out lately," she added shrewdly.

Ruth colored, and did not answer.

Tony sipped her own drink, eyeing Ruth the while. "Tell me about it, kid," she said suddenly. "What happened? How did you get the shiner?"

She leaned forward, her eyes warm and sympathetic. She had an ingratiating manner that invited confidence.

Ruth hesitated, then told her everything.

"I see," Tony said thoughtfully. "Well, kid, there's one thing sure, you're not going back to that hotel tonight. Would be taking too much of a chance. I know those spick women. She's liable to be waiting for you with a knife or something. Or have a couple of gorillas beat your brains out."

"But where'll I go?" Ruth asked, thoroughly alarmed. "And all my clothes are in that room."

"Don't worry," Tony said. "I'll look after you tonight. I'll take you to my place over on Grove Street. Tomorrow we'll see. You look to be a nice kid and I don't want to see you in more trouble."

Ruth was grateful, but Tony cut her thanks short.

"Forget it, kid. You'd do the same for me if the tables were turned. I've been through the mill. I know what it is to get a hand from somebody when the going is rough. Forget it and finish your drink. Then we'll mosey along. I can't hang around these gin mills too long. In my work you've got to keep yourself in good shape or your name's mud. Ever do any dancing? It looks easy, but it isn't. One hell of a grind. And if you can't stay tops, you're out. All right, let's go."

Tony's apartment was large, and sumptuously furnished. So much so, in fact, that Ruth expressed surprise.

"Oh, I make out," Tony said. "And I like to have things nice. I can afford it. I told you I am tops in my line. Besides," she added frankly, "the show business . is damn uncertain. Next year I may have a Hollywood contract and five grand a week. Or I may be slinging hash somewhere for peanuts. Never can tell which way the cat will jump. I aim to enjoy myself while I can. Sit down and let me look you over. Jesus! that knee! We've got to take care of that right away. The shiner doesn't matter, but you can't take chances with something you get scraping around on a dirty sidewalk."

She knelt as she spoke and deftly stripped off Ruth's shoes and the torn stockings. Then she helped her off with her dress.

"Shuck everything," she said. "I'll give you something comfortable to wear."

She opened a closet and drew forth a blue silk robe. "Just the color to go with your hair. Put it on and come into the bathroom and I'll go to work on that knee."

Ruth obeyed. The subtle drink she had swallowed was getting in its work. She felt content to drift. Her mind felt numb and she was more than willing to let somebody else make decisions for her. Tony deftly bathed and dressed the injured knee, using plenty of antiseptic. Her hands were steely-strong but gentle and sure in their ministrations.

"Okay," she said at length. "Let's go get comfy."

In the bedroom, she shoved Ruth into a cushioned chair and put a cushion under her feet. She took two slender cigarettes from a lacquered box. They looked to be hand rolled.

"Here you are," she said, lighting one and placing it between Ruth's lips. "Smoke it slow, and drag in deep. Just what you need."

"What kind of tobacco is it?" Ruth asked, after a couple of puffs. "It tastes funny."

"It's a reefer," Tony said, dragging on her own.

"A reefer?"

"Sure. Don't you know what that is? It's marihuana." Ruth's eyes widened. She stared at the slender tube. "That's dope, isn't it?"

"In a way. Not like the regular stuff. Remember what I told you about the absinthe. It's the same with this stuff. Used right, it's fine. Only a damn fool doesn't use it right. And you don't look like a fool. Otherwise I wouldn't have given it to you. A couple more puffs and you've had enough. Too much at first can make you sick. Okay, give me the butt. That will hold you. How you feel?"

"Sort of funny, but not bad. Things seem a little hazy, and you seem farther away from me than I know you are.

"We'll fix that," Tony laughed. She left her chair and dropped to the floor beside Ruth, resting one arm across her knees. "This better? That's the way the stuff acts, at first. Makes things seem far away and hazy. Later you see things as they ought to be, and understand them right. It's great stuff when used right."

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Ruth wondered vaguely just exactly what Tony meant. She didn't wonder very hard. Mental effort of any kind didn't seem worth while. Nothing seemed very worth while. Better just to let things move along of their own accord. There was a funny buzzing in her ears. Her eyes seemed to want to open too wide. The blood was singing in her veins, and it was hot, strangely hot. But not unpleasantly so.

"Come on, kid," Tony said. "You belong in bed."

Ruth stretched out, dreamy and content. She hardly realized it when Tony removed the silken robe and lay down beside her. It was only when Tony's mouth came down on hers, hard, that her mind aroused a little. She struggled a trifle, feebly. She struggled more at the feel of Tony's lips, hot, on her. And against the reaching, exploring hands.

"Oh, don't, please don't!" she panted. But the strong gentle hands continued. And the hot, questing lips. Ruth tried to raise her body from the bed, but Tony held her down, murmuring soothing words, kissing and caressing her. The pulse began beating in Ruth's throat. She made one more feeble effort, voiced an incoherent protest. Then abruptly, all her resistance ceased.

What was happening to her revolted her, but wooed her with a terrible and frightening allure. It was different from anything she had ever experienced. Different, but wonderful. The subtle, crazing difference of the caress of a woman's lips and tongue on her flesh. There was a deftness to Tony's strong, gentle hands that no man's hands could hope to equal. A fire to her kisses that thrilled and maddened. The soft mouth caressed her, working a steadily narrowing circle that unerringly spiralled to its ultimate objective. Ruth experienced an erotic, mystical delirium of delight, such a pleasure she would not have believed possible. A rising, swelling sensation achieving an unbelievable crescendo. And when she reached her paroxysm, it was so great, so utterly devastating that the world seemed to explode in roaring flame, her brain reeled and her body was one surging wave of exquisite emotion that left her incapable of movement or coherent thought.

Pages 183-184: Having experienced absinthe, marijuana, cocaine and finally heroin (here called The White Fairy), and after many further erotic adventures - including, in the author's words, "the utter depths of degradation", Ruth finally finds redemption in the novel's closing page:

And then the Inferno struck. Ruth paced the floor in agony, biting her lips to hold back the screams, tears stinging her eyes. On the table lay her bag, in it the hypodermic and the little bottle of white tablets. She regarded it with mingled longing and terror. Instinctively she knew that if she succumbed she was forever and irretrievably lost. The fiends tore at her with tooth and claw. Their insidious voices whispered in her ear, promising instant and glorious relief.

Finally she picked up the bag and crept out into the darkness. The walls of the room seemed to be closing in on her.

Her steps turned to the great bridge. Far out on the span, she leaned against the rail and looked down at the black water so far below. It would be peaceful down there. Cool and peaceful. With all the pain and all the fears swallowed up once and for all. The sparkles of light on the little wave crests had such a friendly look. They seemed to whisper, Come!

She looked back to the great city. The Inferno that was New York with its white towers and its glitter of lights. A jungle, it was. Where the tigers crouched in the branches overhead, ready to spring, and the weak skulked in the underbrush, afraid. A seething Inferno where one must fight eternally to survive. Back there the tigers were waiting for her. It would take guts to outface them.

And below, the peaceful black water whispered, Come!

Abruptly, with a thrill of hope, Ruth realized that she was no longer afraid to die! The White Fairy had lost that incomparable weapon with which she binds her victims to the hell of their own making. *No longer afraid to die!*

The thought stimulated her mind. She began to think coherently for the first time in hours. To think, and to remember.

She thought of her father. She'd hardly thought of him in months. She wondered did he worry about her. She'd write him, tell him she was all right.

But could she? Was she all right? Could she trust herself, believe in herself?

Others believed in her. Judge Rawlins believed in her. The old doctor believed in her. Jack the sailor believed in her. And Blackie - Blackie had believed in her!

"Suck in your guts, kid, stick out your chest, and carry on!"

Instinctively, she squared her shoulders. Yes, they all believed in her. Goddamn it! she couldn't let them down!

Abruptly the truth hammered home. By God, she believed in herself!

She opened her bag, took out the hypodermic syringe and the little bottle of tablets, and hurled them far out over the river. She leaned forward to watch the tiny splash. She waved a derisive hand at the black water.

Chin up, her breasts pointing bravely, she walked back to the Inferno.

End.