

TITLE: TILLIE

FORMAT/GENRE: Feature - Coming-of-Age Female-Driven Drama

BASED ON: *Tillie, a Mennonite Maid; A Story of the Pennsylvania Dutch* by H.R. Martin, 1904

LOGLINE: *In 1890s Pennsylvania Dutch Country, a gifted girl must survive her tyrannical father and overcome a spiritual crisis to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher.*

COMPS: ANNE OF GREEN GABLES/LITTLE WOMEN/JANE EYRE

SETTING: 1890s Pennsylvania Dutch Country, ruled by farmers, religious sects and fear.

ABOUT US: We are American expat screenwriters based in Tokyo. As people who have always been considered “outsiders,” we chose to adapt TILLIE because its theme of rising above oppression to achieve one’s dreams resonated with us. TILLIE is our third feature screenplay. (For more about us, visit davidchester.com)

SYNOPSIS: A kerosene lamp illuminates the austere world of **TILLIE GETZ** (12) as she studies the Bible—the only book she’s allowed to read at home by her father **JACOB** (35), a humorless, penny-pinching farmer. Her attempts to clarify a passage are met with Jacob’s uneducated responses, then harsh reminders to get to bed. Tomorrow is school, after which she must return immediately to help Jacob in the celery beds. This is Tillie’s world.

But school means hope. Beloved teacher **MARGARET** (25) recognizes Tillie’s intellectual gifts and rewards her with the classic novel *Ivanhoe*. It’s Tillie’s first novel. It’s risky to bring home, but Tillie feels a rush of emotion as she starts reading and soon loses herself in the story. That night, Jacob finds Tillie reading *Ivanhoe* by candlelight. He beats her unmercifully and burns the book. Tillie’s stepmother and siblings stand by in silent fear, knowing better than to interfere.

Tillie falls ill and Margaret visits with gifts: a notebook and pencils. But Tillie won’t accept them, blurting out that Jacob burned *Ivanhoe*. Now she’ll never know the ending! Margaret promises Tillie she will, and insists she accepts the gifts. Tillie does, gratefully.

To avoid future problems, Margaret allows Tillie to read the classics at school. Tillie reads freely, imagining places she can only dream of seeing beyond the confines of her small town of New Canaan— and the unwanted advances of her none-too-bright classmate, **ABSALOM** (13).

Jacob abruptly decides Tillie has “learned enough for a girl” and takes her out of school. Margaret protests; Tillie is gifted; she could become a great teacher! Tillie’s heart soars, but Jacob word is law: Tillie must care for her siblings and help on the farm. Margaret, who will marry and leave New Canaan, is heartbroken; she has failed Tillie. But Tillie promises her she will somehow keep learning. She now has a goal: to one day teach and inspire others, as Margaret has inspired her.

For the next several years, Margaret sends books and letters to Tillie via **DOC** (50), New Canaan’s kindly doctor, who hides them in a secluded grove (Tillie’s “safe haven”). Tillie endures many hardships on the farm, escaping when she can to the safe haven for precious moments to study, to respond to Margaret’s encouraging letters and to write in her treasured notebook.

Now 16, the harsh realities of Tillie’s life have worn her down, and the dream of being a teacher is fading fast. But things change when Tillie, an Evangelical, attends the funeral of a New Mennonite neighbor. When she hears the reverend’s sermon, something in her awakens. She “feels the Spirit” and the call to be a teacher is renewed. With her loving **AUNT EM** (40s, Jacob’s sister), also a New Mennonite, they tell Jacob of Tillie’s desire to convert. Jacob is furious, but he’s a God-fearing man and reluctantly he gives Tillie his blessing. Tillie, re-baptized, happily renounces all vanity and dons the female members’ distinctive black garb and white cap. Absalom, also a New Mennonite, is now convinced that his and Tillie’s futures are interwoven.

Tillie and Em concoct a plan to have Jacob hire out Tillie to work at Em's hotel as a maid. This will give Jacob money and Tillie the chance to study at night without fear. Soon Tillie learns that Harvard graduate **WALTER** (22) will board at the hotel and teach at the local school. With Em's blessing—and the proviso that Jacob must never know—Walter tutors Tillie so she can one day pass the teacher's exam. They quickly bond over their love of learning and a friendship blossoms. But Absalom still has his sights on Tillie. He arrives one night, gifts Tillie with a book, then forces her to kiss him. Walter intervenes, but Absalom threatens to get him fired: his father is president of the Board of Education. To shield Walter, Tillie pretends to like Absalom. Confused, Walter leaves. Tillie calms Absalom by allowing him to put his arm around her as she reads to him.

One night a stray curl escapes Tillie's cap. She rushes to push back this sign of vanity, but Walter stops her: *it's beautiful, just as God made it*. Something awakens in Tillie; she lets the curl fall free. Soon she refuses to push back her curls. This willful vanity causes Em and the New Mennonite Elders to shun her. Tillie bids Walter farewell and returns to Jacob and the farm. Absalom now visits often to court her. Her hopes for the future have vanished.

Tillie, now 18, tracks down Walter and confesses she feigned interest in Absalom so Walter could keep his job. She's also given up on being a teacher; she's not ready. Walter takes her hands and says she's "always been ready." Jacob discovers them and a brutal fight ensues. Walter is fired and leaves New Canaan. Tillie, encouraged by Walter's words, secretly takes the teacher's exam, acing it. In an elegant speech, she convinces the School Board (Jacob is a member) to hire her to replace Walter. Jacob, planning to take Tillie's monthly salary of \$40, happily votes for her.

Now the local school's new teacher, Tillie's dream has come true. But when she collects her first pay at the General Store, she learns that Jacob had come earlier and collected a letter from Walter addressed to her. Tillie races home. Jacob demands her salary — and Tillie demands Walter's letter! Jacob says he burnt it. Tillie slaps him. He grabs his strap. She grabs a knife and threatens to kill him if he ever touches her again. She says goodbye to her stepmother and siblings and boards at the General Store. For the first time, Tillie is now an independent woman.

The next day Absalom warns Tillie that Jacob plans to get the Board to fire her for insubordination at the next Board Meeting. But if she will marry Absalom, he'll make sure she wants for nothing. Tillie, once and for all, gently tells him she can never be his. He leaves, devastated.

With no one in her corner, Tillie plans to move to nearby Lancaster to be a maid or seamstress — anything until she can be a teacher again. But just as she's about to leave, Walter, who now works with Margaret's husband, arrives with a letter from Margaret. Margaret has never stopped thinking of how to make up for what was taken away from Tillie; at last she can. She invites Tillie to resume her studies at the Millersville Teacher's College, live with Margaret's family, then travel to Europe with them for the summer to visit all the places Tillie could "only dream of seeing." Armed with hope, and self-respect, Tillie is determined to resign before she is fired. But first, Walter says that in his letter, the one she never received, he confessed feelings for her; does she feel the same? She admits she does and they plan to leave together that night.

Tillie interrupts the Board Meeting at the hotel to inform the Board of her good news. Before they can fire her, she resigns, leaving Jacob in shock. She then finds Em and tells her how much she loves her. In accordance with her New Mennonite beliefs, Em cannot acknowledge Tillie. But Tillie embraces Em, and at the last moment, Em touches Tillie's hand. A bond has been repaired.

Tillie says goodbye to the people she's known her whole life. As Tillie and Walter set off on their new adventure, Tillie sees Jacob in the hotel window... powerless to stop her.