

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: *A gifted girl must survive her tyrannical father and overcome a spiritual crisis to become a teacher and her own woman in 1890s Pennsylvania Dutch Country.*

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

SETTING: Pennsylvania Dutch Country, ruled by narrow-minded farmers and religious sects.

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. Tillie’s 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 and risky to bring home, but as soon as she starts reading it she feels a rush of emotion and loses herself in the story. Late 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 misses school. Margaret visits and is shocked to learn what Jacob has done. She apologizes for giving Tillie the book. But Tillie is glad Margaret gave it her; it was “wonderful good!” Her only concern is now she’ll never know the ending! Margaret promises she will.

To avoid antagonizing Jacob, Margaret allows Tillie to read novels at school. Tillie does so 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).

One day Jacob decides Tillie has “learned enough for a girl” and takes her out of school to care for her siblings and help on the farm. Margaret protests. Tillie is gifted; she could become a great teacher! But Jacob’s word is law. Margaret, who will marry soon and leave New Canaan, is heartbroken; she has failed Tillie. But in Tillie’s mind, she now has a goal: to find a way to keep learning so that she, too, can teach and inspire other children, as Margaret has inspired her.

For the next few 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 toils away on the farm, escaping when she can to the safe haven to study, respond to Margaret’s encouraging letters and write in her notebook— a precious gift from Margaret.

Now 16, the harsh realities of Tillie’s life have worn her down; the dream of becoming a teacher has faded. Things change when Tillie, an Evangelical, attends the funeral of a New Mennonite neighbor. When she hears the reverend’s uplifting sermon, something in her awakens. She “feels the Spirit” and the call to be a teacher is renewed. Tillie and her loving **AUNT EM** (40s, Jacob’s sister), also a New Mennonite, tell Jacob of Tillie’s desire to convert. Jacob is furious, but as a God-fearing man he reluctantly gives Tillie his blessing. Tillie, re-baptized, renounces all vanity and dons the distinctive black garb and white cap of the New Mennonite women. 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 freely. Soon Harvard graduate **WALTER** (22) arrives to stay at the hotel and teach at the local school. With Em's blessing, Walter tutors Tillie so she can one day pass the teacher's exam. They bond over their love of learning and a friendship blossoms— which is soon threatened when Absalom arrives one night and forces Tillie 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.

But on another night, as Tillie studies, a curl escapes from her cap. She rushes to push it back, but Walter stops her: *it's beautiful, just as God made it*. Something stirs in Tillie. Soon she lets *all* her curls fall free. This willful sign of vanity gives Em and the New Mennonite Elders no choice but to publicly shun her. Forced to leave the hotel, Tillie bids Walter farewell and returns to life in hell on Jacob's farm. Absalom immediately starts to court her and her hopes for the future vanish.

Tillie, now 18, risks Jacob's wrath and meets Walter to confess she only feigned interest in Absalom so he could keep his job. Also, she'll never be a teacher; she's no longer ready. Walter insists she's *always* been ready, but must take the upcoming exam! For a tender moment, they hold hands. Jacob finds them, a brawl ensues and Walter is forced to leave New Canaan. Tillie secretly takes the teacher's exam, aces it and convinces the Board to hire her in Walter's place. Jacob (a Board Member) gladly votes for her, intending to take all \$40 of her monthly salary.

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 Jacob had arrived earlier and collected a letter from Walter addressed to her. Tillie races home. Jacob demands her salary; Tillie demands Walter's letter! Jacob says he burned it. Tillie slaps him. He grabs his strap; she grabs a knife. If he *ever* touches her again, *she will kill him!* She says goodbye to her stepmother and siblings and boards at the General Store. For the first time, Tillie is an independent woman.

The next day Absalom warns Tillie that Jacob will 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, crushed.

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. Just as she's about to leave, Walter, who now teaches with Margaret's professor husband, arrives with a letter from Margaret. Margaret has never forgiven herself for leaving Tillie as she did, but now she can finally make up for it. She invites Tillie to live with her family and study at the Millersville Teacher's College, then travel to Europe with them for the summer to visit all the places Tillie could "only dream of seeing." Armed with hope, and, at last, self-respect, Tillie sets out to resign before she is fired. But first, Walter says that in his letter (the one she never received) he confessed strong feelings for her; does she feel the same? She admits she does. They decide to leave together that night.

Tillie interrupts the Board Meeting at the hotel to inform the Board of her great 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.