

**PHOEBE TILSON**

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Phoebe Tilson by Mrs. Frank Pope Humphrey

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**MRS. FRANK POPE HUMPHREY**

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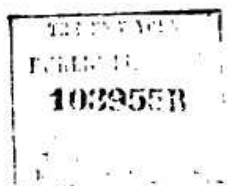
BY  
MRS. FRANK POPE HUMPHREY,  
AUTHOR OF  
"A NEW ENGLAND CACTUS," "THE CHILDREN OF OLD PARKS  
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# PHŒBE TILSON.

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## CHAPTER I.

In the early fall of 18—, the town of Byfield, Massachusetts, was deeply stirred by the tragedy of Phœbe Tilson's marriage; or, to express oneself more accurately, of her abortive marriage.

Phœbe was a spinster, rising forty, and looked every one of her years. She was lean and angular. Her pale orange hair was thin, and upon her face Time had set his stamp in those lines from nostril to chin which are the sure indication of his progress.

Phœbe had never been really young; had never sown the crop of feminine wild oats usually scattered broadcast by the Byfield girls before settling down into matronhood; had never been to dances; never had played whist or high-low-jack, or heard the sleigh-bells at midnight. She had always been serious-minded. Had at fifteen joined the church of which her father was deacon, a man who would never have condoned in his only child the pursuit of amusements so sinful. Phœbe had shared his views concerning those worldly pleas-



ures, or, rather, had accepted them as she did her church creed, unquestioningly. She knew nothing by experience of their fascinations, and it is so easy, with Hudibras' Puritans, to

“Compound for sins we are inclined to,  
By damning those we have no mind to.”

Not that Phœbe did this; she was a good woman—she meant to be good. And she did not care for amusements. At least, she was conscious of no want in that direction. Her daily duties filled her life.

The serious-minded girl grew into the serious-minded woman. The blessing promised those who honor father and mother was sure to be hers; for she looked well to their comfort. One after the other, she closed their eyes in the last sleep. The farm was left her unconditionally. She had for a long time virtually been its manager, and no break in the continuity of its thrift could be detected by the most critical eye. She was alone, and in middle life. Before her stretched a path similar to that which lay behind; a path narrow, straight and fairly smooth to her feet; bordered with a few homely flowers; subject to no atmospheric extremes; monotonous, but by no means devoid of its own special charm—the last kind of path, in fact, by which one would expect finally to stumble among the dark mountains.


Considering all this, it was the more strange

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that she should ever have "thought of"—Byfield's modest euphemism for "fallen in love with"—Walter Emery, who was the gayest of the gay, who went to every dance far and near when he was in cash, and who had a real passion for cards, playing for money, it was rumored, in his shoe-shop at night after the shutters—weekly copies of the *Old Colony Memorial*—were up. Serious people shook their heads when Emery's shop was mentioned.

But to the many it seemed still stranger that Emery—handsome and her junior by nearly twenty years—should ever have "thought of" Phœbe. No euphemism this time, but a plain statement of a plain fact. For no one but Phœbe herself was fool enough even to dream that he could be in love with her. But the situation explained itself. If Phœbe in her own person was singularly destitute of attraction, her acres were not, at least to Emery, who was not only poor, but born of a vagrant mother, and so handicapped from the beginning, in this community of correct ideas in regard to marriage and legitimacy. To marry Phœbe and become a landowner, and through virtue of that a man of consequence in town, to become one of its selectmen, and in time—why not?—its representative to the general court—this certainly was no mean ambition. It opened a vista infinitely more attractive to a man leisurely inclined than driving pegs for life at so much a case.



Not that he failed to see the sacrifice of himself he was making. He did that to the full. He understood his own value, and was as proud of his beauty as a peacock, and of his dancing, and of his ability, alas! to win the fancy of more than one silly girl. But his face was always set toward the main chance; and there is nothing crueller than vanity. He might look into little Amy Clark's blue eyes, and squeeze her hand at every turn in monymusk, and whisper sweet nothings in her ear in the moonlight walk home, until her heart beat so with happiness it almost suffocated her. But he meant nothing. And when the silly little thing learned that he meant nothing, and sickened and went off in a quick decline, "the more fool she." It was a pity if a fellow couldn't look at a girl without her thinking him in love with her, and pretending it was that that killed her.

But poor little Amy never pretended. It was Emery's fraction of a conscience, still quick at that time, that told him who was her murderer. As he looked down upon the broken flower in its coffin, her mother gave him, at Amy's desire, she said, a small packet. It contained a withered spray of swamp pink and a lock of sunny hair. The swamp pink he recognized. He remembered the day and hour when he fastened it in the sunny hair. Amy had been more than usually silly that night, and he had come uncommonly near making a fool of himself. Faugh! There still clung to

it a breath of its cloying sweetness, a ghostly fragrance. How such frail things lasted! And he tossed flower and hair into the fire with a sneer and an oath. And his hour had passed. His fraction of a conscience fell dead, and thenceforth his life went on unvexed by its monitions. For so it is; a man's choice of evil once deliberately made, conscience may find its resurrection, but not until he has trodden his chosen pathway to the end.

Phœbe, like hapless little Amy, and sundry others who recovered and wondered at their infatuation, and afterward married respectably and happily, fell a prey to Emery's charms of person and of manner. It is a fallacy largely cherished by the extremely young that they only ever truly love. But we graybeards know better. Love is like measles. Taken early, and with sufficiency of nursing and warm possets, there is little doubt of an ultimate if not rapid convalescence. But let the sweet infection seize you in middle life, and both physicians and possets are in vain. And human nature being much the same in man and maid, such is doubtless the case with the middle-aged spinster. At least, so it was with Phœbe Tilson.

Love took possession of her after a mad fashion that would have astonished her, were love ever astonished at itself. But to itself it is the most reasonable of passions. That it should regard as a god the object of its adoration seems