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tails you lose
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Tale of Twelve

By Theodore Vallone

"She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. She was nineteen, but her fully matured body and large frame made her appear in her early thirties. It was sad to see her crouched like a Hindu on that straw and soil covered floor clutching her child as though at any moment it might be snatched from her. She sat motionless with her bare knees pointing awkwardly at oblique angles toward the stone walls. How I would have dressed this queen! With gowns and furs and a tiara for her long black hair. But as it was her beauty was housed in a short plain dress made gray and thin from too many washings. And yet she had elegance. Her smudged forehead and darkened eyes could not obscure this fact. And she was gentle. She shared her natural warmth with her child and with an infant lamb which lay curled snugly against her hip."

"Lucia's mother stood waiting patiently with a large bowl in her hands while her daughter unfolded, adjusted, and readjusted the table cloth she had spread upon the warped boards of the outdoor table. Since the first hot days of summer, the family ate dinner together under the shade of an ancient rusty-leaved apple tree which stood just beyond the path leading to the fields. It was too stuffy to eat indoors, and besides Lucia could not bear to be separated from her beloved tree. This little twelve year old tomboy with blue jeans and chestnut-colored pigtails made the upper stories of the tree her playground from sunup to sundown. Even when ordered by her mother to set out a few dishes, she could not forget the tree, and so she danced and jiggled around the table like leaves shaken by the wind. Her mother seemed not to notice Lucia's antics and went about her own work. Perhaps she remembered her own childhood days and realized how quickly they could slip away. She was young herself, though the hard work required of a farmer's wife had left disastrous effects upon her health. An appearance of oldness seemed to extend to the very spirit of this small, fragile woman. And indeed it was a spirit dulled by constant strife with herself, her husband, and the world. Her graying hair was tightly drawn back from her plain and featureless face—a face which could do nothing but wrinkle with age. Dressed, as all peasant women are, in a long black dress and shawl, she could see herself with ugly hump-backed ladies on the way to light candles or to the evening novena. This she could see all too plainly and it made her bitter to think there was no escape.

When the table was set, two men appeared on the path walking slowly homeward. As they passed the storage shack the larger of the two pointed