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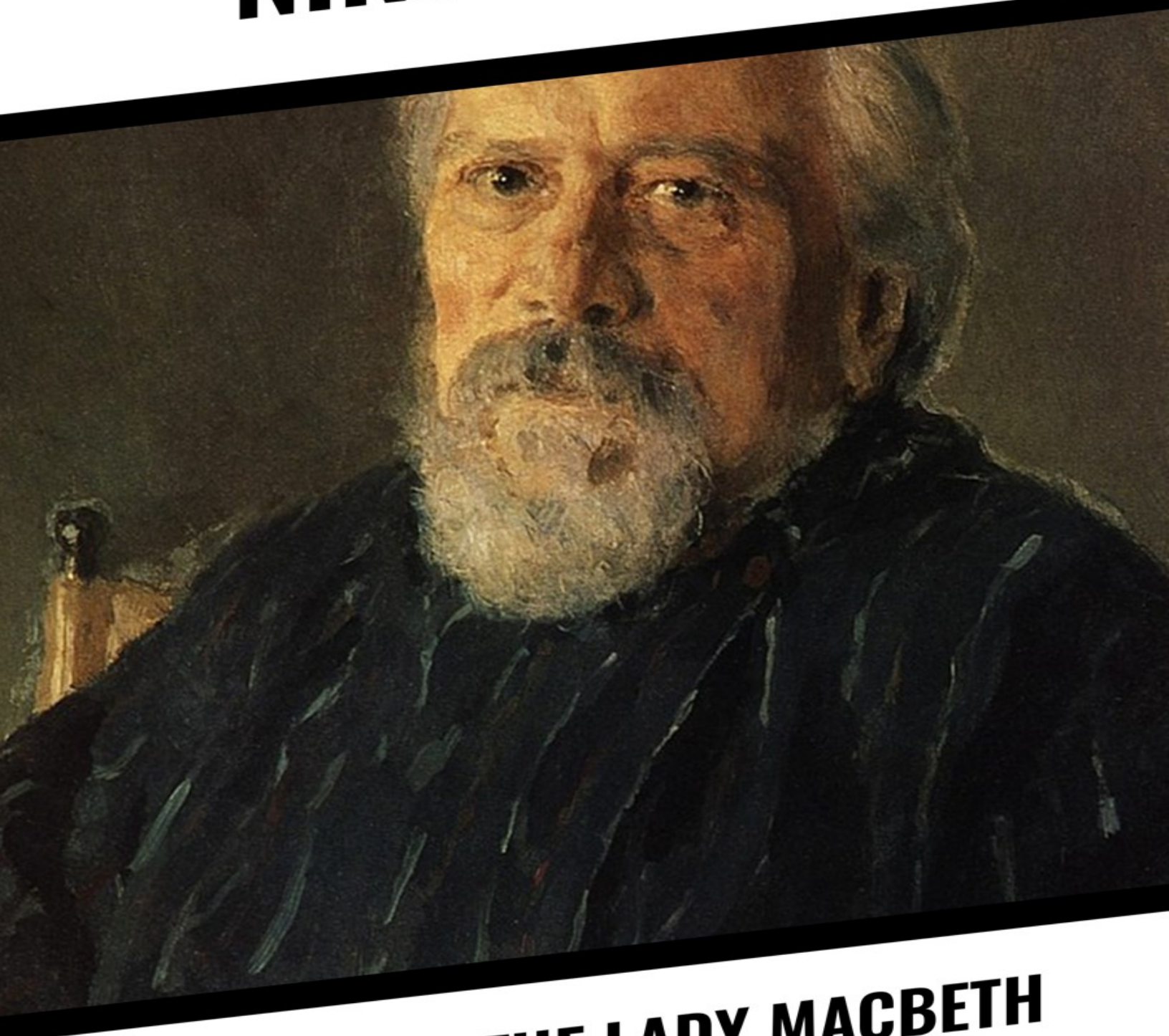
NIKOLAI LESKOV



THE LADY MACBETH OF THE MZINSK DISTRICT

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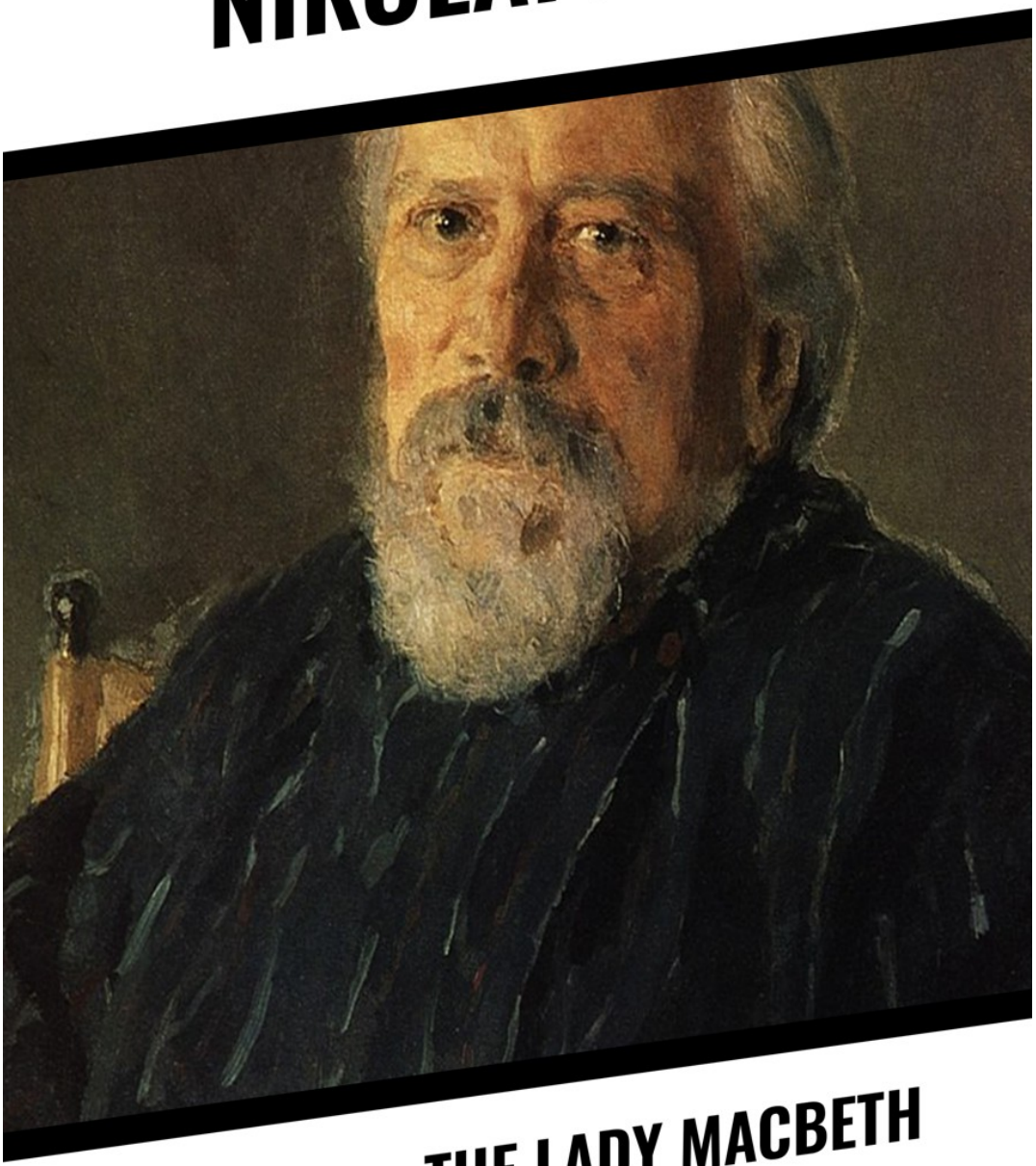

THE LADY MACBETH OF THE MZINSK DISTRICT

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The Lady Macbeth of the Mzinsk District

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In our part of the country you sometimes meet people of whom, even many years after you have seen them, you are unable to think without a certain inward shudder. Such a character was the merchant's wife, Katerina Lvovna Izmaylova, who played the chief part in a terrible tragedy some time ago, and of whom the nobles of our district, adopting the light nickname somebody had given her, never spoke otherwise than as the Lady Macbeth of the Mzinsk District.

Katerina Lvovna was not really a beauty, but she was a woman of a very pleasing appearance. She was about twenty-four years of age; not very tall, but slim, with a neck that was like chiseled marble; she had soft round shoulders, firm breasts, a straight thin little nose, bright black eyes, a high white forehead, and black, almost blue black, hair. She came from Tuskar in the Kursk province and had married Izmaylov, a merchant of our place, not because she loved him or from any attraction towards him, but simply because he courted her, and she, being a poor girl, was not able to be too particular in making her choice of a husband. The firm of the Izmaylovs was one of the most considerable in our town; they dealt in wheaten flour, leased a large flour mill in the district, owned profitable fruit orchards not far from town, and in the town had a fine house. In a word, they were wealthy merchants. Their family was quite small. It

consisted of her father-in-law, Boris Timofeich Izmaylov, a man of nearly eighty who had long been a widower; Zinovey Borisych Katerina Lvovna's husband, a man of over fifty; and Katerina Lvovna herself. Katerina Lvovna, who had now been married for five years, had no children. Zinovey Borisych had also no children from his first wife, with whom he had lived for twenty years before he became a widower and married Katerina Lvovna. He had thought and hoped that God would give him an heir by his second marriage to inherit his commercial name and fortune; but in this, too, he and Katerina Lvovna had no luck.

Not having children grieved Zinovey Borisych very much, and not only Zinovey Borisych, but also the old man Boris Timofeich, and it made even Katerina Lvovna herself very sad; first, because the immeasurable dullness of this secluded merchant's house, with its high fence and unchained watch-dogs, often made her feel so very melancholy that she almost went mad, and she would have been pleased, God knows how pleased, to have had a child to nurse; and also because she was tired of hearing reproaches: Why did she get married? What was the use of getting married? Why was she, a barren woman, bound by fate to a man? Just as if she had indeed committed a crime against her husband, against her father-in-law, and their whole race of honest merchants.

Notwithstanding all the wealth and plenty that surrounded her in her father-in-law's house, Katerina Lvovna's life was a very dull one. She seldom went to visit anyone, and even when she drove with her husband to any of his merchant friends, it was no pleasure. The people were

all strict: they watched how she sat down, how she walked across the room, how she got up. Now Katerina Lvovna had a passionate nature, and having been brought up in poverty she was accustomed to simplicity and freedom: running with pails to the river for water, bathing under the pier in a shift, or scattering sun-flower seeds over the gate on to the head of any young fellow who might be passing by. Here all was different. Her father-in-law and her husband got up early, drank tea at six o'clock, and then went out to their business, and she stayed behind, to roam about the house from one room to another. Everywhere it was clean, everywhere it was quiet and empty; the lamps glimmered before the icons; but nowhere in the house could you hear the sound of life or a human voice.

Katerina Lvovna would wander about the empty rooms, and begin to yawn because she was dull. Then mounting the stairs to their conjugal chamber, which was in a high, small attic, she would sit down at the window and look at the men weighing hemp or filling sacks with flour—she would yawn again—she was glad to feel sleepy—she would then take a nap for an hour or two, and when she awoke—there was the same dullness, the Russian dullness, the dullness of a merchant's house, which they say makes it quite a pleasure to strangle oneself. Katerina Lvovna did not like reading and even had she liked it there were no books in the house except the Kiev Lives of the Fathers.

This was the dull life Katerina Lvovna had lived in the house of her rich father-in-law all the five years of her married life with her indifferent husband; but nobody, as usual, took the slightest notice of her loneliness.