

To such people as are willing to think  
in the theatre, *The New Sin* was one  
of the most interesting  
plays that have been dis-  
closed in many seasons.  
It is the first dramatic  
work of Mr. Basil Macdonald Hast-  
ings, the editor of the *London Bystand-*

**“The New  
Sin”**

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er; and it augurs well for his future as a playwright. Mr. Hastings has brains—a fact of which this present effort gives abundant evidence; and he is also endowed with a natural instinct for the theatre. *The New Sin* discusses a momentous theme with extraordinary intellectual intensity, and the author has developed his plot with a sure sense of theatrical effectiveness. Yet the play failed badly in New York; and the only logical reason for the failure was that the story of the drama was not equally as important as the theme. The average person can seldom see through a body to the soul; and the average audience can rarely look behind a particular story for the general truth that it incorporates.

The essence of *The New Sin* is a struggle between the right to live and the duty to die; and the author's purpose is to imagine a man so circumstanced that his mere continuance to live shall seem to him a sin, because his death would obviously benefit a dozen of his fellow-beings. This theme was familiar enough in the life of ancient Rome and is still familiar as a point of honour in Japan; but in England at the present day the theme looks strange and new, because it has been traditional in Europe for nearly sixteen hundred years to assume as an axiom the right to live and to deny, even as a theoretic possibility, the duty to die. Hence this modern play, in which the author intended to weigh life and death in an impartial and reasonable balance, was destined from the outset to be a startling work; and it might have been a great work if Mr. Hastings had succeeded in inventing a story that was worthy of his theme.

But the story of *The New Sin* is scarcely satisfactory, because it is based upon an assumption which, though not impossible, is so extraordinary as to seem incredible. Hilary Cutts had quarrelled with his father; and, before dying, the old gentleman had tied up his large fortune in such a way that Hilary should never receive a penny of it. Not only did he leave all his money to the ten or a dozen of Hilary's younger brothers and sisters; but, fearing lest they should give or lend a share of their legacies to him, he made a provision that the money

should not be paid to them till Hilary should die, or, in the event of his continuance in life, until the lapse of twenty-one years. It is difficult to accept this eccentric will as the condition precedent to an earnest intellectual discussion; but if this initial weakness of the story be condoned, the critic must admit that the subsequent progress of the plot seems at all points truthful and inevitable.

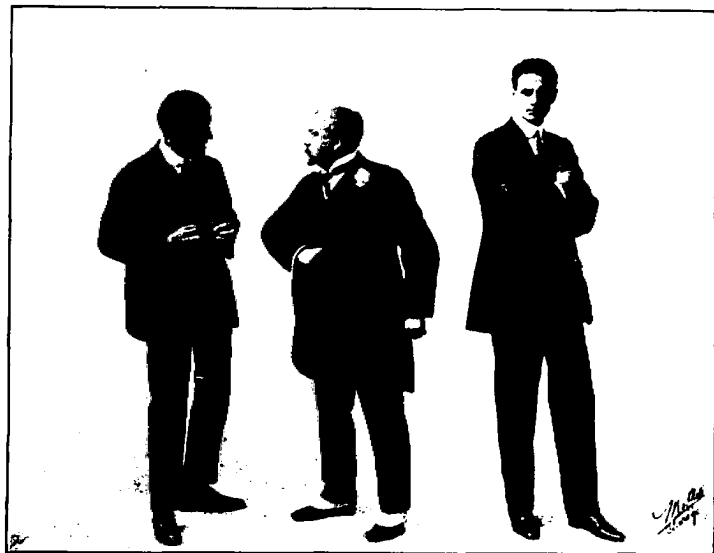
It happens that Hilary is the only member of the family who is of any use. He is a promising painter, and is easily able to earn his own living; but his brothers and sisters are incapable of self-support and are soon reduced to want. Hilary, who stands between them and their fortune, gives them nearly all the money that he earns, and thereby so hampers his own career that he is prevented from accomplishing any genuine service to the world; but even this quixotic generosity does not lift his family above the level of desperation. He therefore decides, after mature deliberation, that it is his duty to commit suicide, in order that his helpless brothers and sisters may succeed to their inheritance.

Hilary's younger brother, Max, a weak-minded and iniquitous youth, has been discharged for misconduct from the draper's establishment in which he had been working. He happens to meet his ex-employer in Hilary's rooms; and, impulsively seizing the pistol which his brother had intended to turn against himself, he shoots the draper dead. The situation is intensified by the fact that the draper was a sensual and brutal beast and that society has obviously been benefited by his taking off. Hilary's course is now clear. He can both save his brother and accomplish his own determined suicide by assuming the guilt of the murder and getting himself judicially executed. He is convicted on his own confession and the corroborative testimony of Max, and is condemned to death. But at the last moment his sentence is commuted to imprisonment for life; so that his desperate relatives are, if anything, worse off than they were before.

With this ironic note the play originally ended; but Mr. Hastings was persuaded to add another act for American audiences, in which Max confesses his

guilt and Hilary is set free, after which Hilary sells a picture for a large sum and buys his relatives off by giving them the money.

The intellectual power of this play cannot be suggested by any summary of its story, since the story is less worthy than the theme; but the dialogue is crammed full of thought which is both earnest and profound. The author occasionally speaks in his own person instead of allowing his characters to speak for themselves; but all that he says is interesting. The characters are clearly and powerfully drawn, and the dialogue is admirably written. No woman appears upon the stage throughout the entire course of the action; and though the play is all the better for this unusual omission, the general public may have been disappointed by the suppression of the eternal feminine. But whatever may have been the cause of the failure of *The New Sin*, the fact remains that it is a work of quite uncommon intellectual distinction. It is deplorable that the New York public should permit such a worthy play to fail.



**"THE NEW SIN"—ACT II**

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