

**BLANCHETTE, AND  
THE ESCAPE; TWO  
PLAYS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649148134

Blanchette, and The escape; two plays by Eugène Brieux & H. L. Mencken & Frederick Eisemann

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Cover @ 2017

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**EUGÈNE BRIEUX & H. L. MENCKEN & FREDERICK EISEMANN**

**BLANCHETTE, AND  
THE ESCAPE; TWO  
PLAYS**



**BLANCHETTE AND THE  
ESCAPE · TWO PLAYS BY  
BRIEUX · WITH PREFACE  
BY H. L. MENCKEN · TRANS-  
LATED FROM THE FRENCH  
BY FREDERICK EISEMANN**

**JOHN W. LUCE & COMPANY  
BOSTON MCMXIII**

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2201  
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**PREFACE**  
**BY H. L. MENCKEN**





## PREFACE

"After the death of Ibsen," says George Bernard Shaw, in his preface to the first English translation of Brieux's plays, "Brieux confronted Europe as the most important dramatist west of Russia. In that kind of comedy which is so true to life that we have to call it tragi-comedy, and which is not only an entertainment but a history and a criticism of contemporary morals, he is incomparably the greatest writer France has produced since Molière."

A somewhat extravagant statement, perhaps — who, indeed, looks for restraint and niceness in a Shavian preface? — but still one with a certain unmistakable flavor of truth in it. All the acknowledged giants of the French drama since Molière have been giants of dramaturgy rather than giants of truth. Working in series from Beaumarchais to Sardou, with Scribe as the master of them all, they have brought the form of the stage play very close to perfection, but they have not added much that is of consequence to its content. Even the younger Dumas, for all his famous revolt against the snarled conventions of

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classicism and romanticism, did no more than set up a new convention in place of the old ones. The drama of ideas that he preached quickly became, in the hands of Augier, Coppée and Feuillet, a drama of one idea only. Its sole problem was that of the woman taken in adultery. In some of these variations upon "La Dame aux Camélias," the successors to Marguerite Gautier were defended and in some they were excoriated, in some they were married and in some they were not, but the struggle depicted in every one was that between such a woman and the moral forces of society. The result was an inelastic and monotonous type of play, with the so-called drama of the triangle as its highest development. After a while, indeed, the word "eternal" came to be inserted before "triangle," as if this single situation were immutable and inevitable, and the only proper concern of a serious dramatist. Between the early 60's and the early 90's, France produced scarcely half a dozen first-rate plays in which adultery was not the leading motive. Even Brieux, as we shall see, was forced to yield something to the prevailing fashion when he began.

There were plenty of Frenchmen, of course, who saw that this tedious sounding of one note

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was not realism in any true sense, despite its obvious superiority to the childish romanticism that had gone before it. One of them was Émile Zola, and throughout the 70's he maintained a vigorous war for what he called naturalism on the stage—that is, for an accurate and unsentimental representation of human life as it really was, with the stress laid unequally upon no one of its elements. But Zola, though a novelist of the first genius, had very little skill at playmaking, and the failure of his experiments worked serious damage to his theory. By one of the curious coincidences of literary history, the collapse of his propaganda came at the very moment another and far greater dramatist was converted to it. The convert was Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian, whose first social drama, "A Doll's House," was given to the world in the last days of 1879. Ibsen was not long in conquering Germany and his native Scandinavia, but in France, as in England and the United States, he made so little impression that he remained almost unknown for ten years. By the time "A Doll's House" got to Paris, indeed, a blow for the new naturalism had been already struck by one of Zola's countrymen. This rebel was Eugène Brieux.