

London

Louis-Ferdinand Céline

Translated by Charlotte Mandell



ALMA CLASSICS

ALMA CLASSICS
an imprint of

ALMA BOOKS LTD
60 High Street
Wimbledon Village
London SW19 5EE
United Kingdom
www.almaclassics.com

Represented by:
Authorised Rep Compliance Ltd
Ground Floor
71 Lower Baggot Street
Dublin, D02 P593
Ireland
www.arccompliance.com

London first published in French as *Londres* in 2022
© Éditions Gallimard, 2022
This translation first published by Alma Classics in 2026
Translation © Charlotte Mandell, 2026

Cover: Nathan Burton Design

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



ISBN: 978-1-84749-945-5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be resold, lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the express prior consent of the publisher.

Publisher's Note

This is one of the recently rediscovered manuscripts left behind by Céline when he fled Paris in June 1944. It is, without doubt, one of his most problematic works, in terms of both style and content. It is an early draft that the author was unable to complete, and lacks the narrative coherence of his published novels. Many of its characters are only sketched, names are inconsistent and at times missing, the geography is often baffling or incorrect – whether by design or not, it is hard to say. The graphic, crude, violent and frequently gratuitous descriptions of sex would not have passed muster with the author, his publishers or the censors. Céline would have radically revised the text before submitting it to his publishers, who would certainly have urged the writer to cut or tone down any obscene passages ahead of publication. All this must be borne in mind when reading this unusual work, which, for all its bitterness, paranoia and sheer rage, still contains some remarkable stretches of good writing. In presenting this novel to the public in its original, rough-hewn form, the publisher begs the reader's indulgence for any upsetting or offensive scenes, words and ideas it may contain.

PART ONE

I

At first when we arrived in London I hardly ever saw Angèle. She stopped by to say hello two or three times, and the first month I'd screw her, but that's it. She was too busy, so she said, moving in with her Purcell onto an avenue I didn't yet know near the Marble Arch* in a nice neighbourhood, like the Place de l'Étoile at home, she claimed, on the corner of a Monceau-like park, Hyde Park – pronounced *Haïde*. Me, I never went over there, that was our agreement, so as not to bother them. I stayed in my zone, I asked nothing of anyone, so I'd be left alone. I wasn't the one who would cause trouble. She'd chosen a little furnished room for me on Leicester Street, quite suitable I must say. It's the sort of neighbourhood for easy pleasures, Leicester Street, a side street off a big avenue if you want to get some idea of it, just at the corner of the Empire Theatre. At the time I'm talking about, that was a scene for lively revues, the Empire Theatre. It was the time, too, for propaganda about the front. They got the Brit excited by every means possible, from every angle possible, to make him enter the dance – and he's a tough nut to crack, your Brit! But they'd present the thing in music like a huge patriotic honeymoon, with oompah-pahs booming, a bedazzlement of high thighs in rhythm, in a paradise of blossoming electric flowers. I wonder what more could be needed. At the 22nd Cuirassier it was done more simply, but for the *gentleman* they made some effort. He was a delicate one. He was worked over with suggestions, whisky, cigarettes, pride, frills, fatigue. I said nothing, I admired, that was my role, but still it seemed like child's play to me. When I stopped wearing a uniform on my walks, their recruiter with his little rosette and stick often approached me to sound out my feelings. He made me feel quite proud of myself, he took me for a virgin. He had the gift of the gab. I'd shift from foot to foot. I'd let him go on. It made you dream, really. Listening to him it made me feel younger, I'd got out of a hellhole in good health. I kept listening to him for the pleasure of it. So the wound in my ear wasn't visible? You couldn't hear any of the roar in my head outside? I was telling you that the street I lived on was not far away from Piccadilly Circus, that square jammed with so many vehicles

and windows full of ads. A little adjacent street, somewhat shifty, to tell the truth, with shops that didn't sell much aside from sex, more or less, but on the sly of course, at mezzanine level, the English way. Below, on the ground floor, a pretence of a tearoom – that was where the pimps rested, always on the lookout. She didn't know England, Angèle, but she'd found contacts for me right away: she'd introduced me to her acquaintances. My wounds made me endearing at first. Real friends, then. There's no harm in saying it, up to a point. They were surprised, really, by my military medal, but the bloody decoration made it look as if I was showing off in front of their wives – and that was dangerous. I took off the uniform. I didn't want to show off.

I had the nicely painted garret at the very top, just above Cantaloup's rooms, the little pimp from Montpellier who went on trips. He supplied Leicester Street with extra whores. Cantaloup was already a man with experience, a little like Cascade, but much better educated and more successful. Sometimes he had three or four chicks to house all together in his place, waiting for months for their train to leave for Rio via Coruña. With Cantaloup it was charm that saved him in the profession, not force: often he'd scoop up real English girls, even though they're difficult – he'd pick them up in pubs on nearby Shaftesbury Avenue, fresh young ones, even one who wasn't yet sixteen. The English ones, of course, along with the southern whores, the ordinary ones, he'd put them near Victoria Station on a trial period, so they'd ripen a little. When he introduced them to one another, to his pros, often it would get ugly: the new girls didn't expect there to be so many of them working for Cantaloup. Sometimes it even led to real fights. His big Ursule, the regular, you could say she loved that work. She'd easily break one or two of the beginners' teeth to start with, it was a matter of levelling them out, and then she'd even break a whole broom on their backside to straighten them out. Cantaloup didn't concern himself with his home: his speciality was charm on the street. I could hear everything through his bedroom chimney when beatings were going on. Cantaloup preferred not to be present for such things: he'd go next door to the Royal and sit on the plush banquette with his little buddies from Regent Street. The pub known all over the world. They were very happy, his little buddies, not to be called back to the clown show, still to be on leave, the last pimps in London, thanks to varicose veins and emphysema, short-sightedness and other inconveniences even more clever. They'd stop by the consulate at Bedford Square, his little friends, and give their addresses, trembling, every week. Work had to become more and

more secret. Steal all the chicks of comrades who had gone off to make themselves heroes and who stayed there, stranded. At first there was more demand than ever for whores. The streetwalkers Cantaloup brought back were well chosen – it was rare for Ursule not to end up taming them. The whores would cry when they had to go far away, in just three weeks, or a month, they were already so attached to his and his family's ways. At bottom Cantaloup disapproved of all forms of brutality – he could sense war and massacres in it.

“Go away then,” he'd say to the new ones very gently, “go away, my little one, I'm not holding you back – go away if you're not happy with us. Here you have to obey Ursule, that's all I ask: she's my woman! Don't be surprised... I'm faithful, and you should be like me... You'll appreciate it later. It's not very likely you'll meet many men in your walk of life who keep their promises!... I know how to size them up when I meet them – you'll learn too... I'll find you one if you're a good girl, a regular girl...”

It was a language that had its poetry. It's true that when the time came to sell them he never refused. Ursule trained them in all the particulars. She gave the girls fine lessons in their first days, taught them on Cantaloup himself the technique of the hundred embellishments, and of pleasures greatly appreciated by clients in the tropics. For strength and thickness of thighs Ursule was a real horse. When she thrashed a beginner, she'd wedge her beneath her in a vice, and the more the kid struggled, the more of a thrashing she got, enough that she'd remember that beating for the rest of her life. If she left for Pantagonia,* we never saw her again.

So there'd be endless screaming, and the best thing is the backup whores, and the ones in the room next door showed up like at a party to light into the beginner even more than Ursule. It was up for grabs who could tear out more of her hair, from her head and her bum, till she bled. Afterwards they'd work over her tits some more, and when the novice was about to pass out, when she couldn't even get her breath, everyone had to crush their buttocks against her face, wipe their arses on her face till she suffocated, men and whores alike. Cantaloup preferred to leave, climb upstairs to my place and watch the street.

“What must be done must be done, Ferdinand – and I agree, and it's just and well deserved, but still it's savage and regrettable.”

What worried him more than anything was that people would gather in the street. In England you pay dearly when you draw a crowd and call attention to yourself with violence. Had to be avoided at any price.

Right then, the cop downstairs we knew, with his big stiff hat and his paunch, calm as could be, was cutting through the gentle swell of soldiers all around him, across Picardy.* There was a huge influx of soldiers around six o'clock, guys in khaki, scarlet, reseda, let out of the camps in the suburbs, from all dominions, and our whores at work among them, around cocktail time, girls who whetted the appetite... our flowers... like in a garden. Not counting the Salvation Army, which gives to the blue atmosphere of cigarettes its evening salute, its loud trombone blast and its endless goodwill carols. The crimson buses flow gently by, keeping to the avenue in single file, hunched over, each one close enough behind the other to plug its arsehole, droning.

No need to get emotional. At the time we were all still sporting carefully plastered spit curls, typical red ties, Max Linder moustaches, and those greyish bowler hats that look so good at the races. Leaning down over our Leicester Street, Cantaloup would throw whole shillings at the little musicians so they'd contribute even more to the barbarity, so that passers-by wouldn't hear the human racket, the thrashing coming from our place, and wouldn't look up. They knew Cantaloup well too, the little musicians. They'd even greet him by name, and would fill him in when necessary about anything having to do with his streetwalkers, things he didn't tell me all about. He had known Cascade and had found out from rumours pretty much exactly what had happened in Flanders. He wasn't in a hurry, he didn't judge anything, he preferred to act very reservedly with Angèle. It was as if she was under observation for her behaviour. It was too serious for us to talk about. The war first of all had upset customs too much for anyone to form an opinion about anything. It changed from one day to the next. You tried to figure it out yourself, but you never knew where you stood. To begin with, neither Cantaloup nor the others had a clear conscience. Cantaloup had done everything just to hold on: he needed funds, he needed the streetwalking business to make him a profit. He'd been declared unfit for service because of his heart.

"Look! Without Ursule – listen carefully now to what I'm saying to you – I'd be dead, I'm not afraid to say it... if you only knew how gentle that woman's been to me!... A mother's nothing next to her... But still she can go on trips instead of me. It's hard though, and it destroys me. Especially because of the submarines, we're so supervised on the boats that now it's almost impossible not to get into any trouble. You have to grease palms everywhere. That makes our product super-expensive. Not to mention what a circus it is when you cross in a storm. English girls are

OK: they have their sea legs, they almost never vomit, but that's rare in women, whereas ours, and also the Spanish girls, they're sick all the time – so if you have a stowaway it's a real song and dance, let me tell you... in her cupboard... and she has to spend twenty-three days puking up her guts and innards. I was the one who had to throw them in the water! I've lost 20,000 francs like that, and only because of the sea, mark my words. Ursule trains them to work a man, that's the deal, for that she has no equal, but she can't make them into sailors for me!"

Cantaloup was satisfied with his suits, and, concerned about looking truly elegant, he ordered his clothing only in Marseille. He's the one who gave me the gift of my first civilian clothes when I had to set aside my uniform. We were pretty much the same size.

"English suits are chic, I'll admit it, but when it comes down to it, they're sad, and they don't stand up to jewellery. Can you see me arriving in Rio without my chain or my pink pearl – or my signet ring, which I never take off? No, believe me, Ferdinand. I don't look down on anyone, you know me, but we need something else besides what these guys wear. We have to eat garlic!"

That was true too. There were a good dozen tenants in the Leicester Boarding House. We'd often get together, in the room on the ground floor. And we'd play cards, *manille*. A real living room with padded apple-green sofas, shabby and threadbare – but they could sit four. And ornate ebony tables, all black, and all scattered about, covered in multicoloured decorative pustules. They came from the Indies. A real obsession. It was the landlady, Mrs Council, who had lived in those lands. Her husband had actually died near Gaurishankar (the highest mountain in the world). She was very distinguished, was Mrs Council, and very friendly and well educated and everything. Except her face was all wrinkled. Plus, it should be said that from the Indies she had brought back an expression of weariness, as if all of a sudden she'd understood too many things in the Orient. A kind of nausea of the infinite that she wore all the time on her own face. I tried to make the same expression when I was all alone in front of the mirror, and I couldn't manage it.

You can see that in London I was starting to become interested in something besides my own personal infirmities and my buzzings and wounds. That's already a good sign – maybe I'll even become interesting.

Mrs Council's weariness, so Cantaloup explained to me, was because in the Indies she'd been hot for too long. She never seemed to notice the very particular dealings going on in her place. About that, you learn a certain

way of looking into the street at what's happening in London, which is very useful: using a little mirror we each carried in our pockets, we'd see the reflection of the street in the shop window opposite. I mean, you feel a little hunted. Even playing cards, you still felt it. The game of *belote* didn't exist yet, so far as I know. We played *manille*. For instance, when a working chick walks by, hustling in front of our window, and she's followed (must add that too) by a cop on the hunt, she clicks twice on the glass with her ring, but only once if it's a customer – in which case we'd skedaddle and free up the room, so she can climb the stairs freely. That's two pounds right there. On the first floor a so-called tearoom is set up. Another living room, really, but with double curtains. The sofa is even more colossal, more greasy, more padded. The girl doesn't take out a pin, nothing from her outfit, not even her gloves: that's forbidden. The guy neither. They sit down very proper. They chat. And no nonsense. You should see the waiter come in then with his tails, his gloves on too, all well worn, very sad, and his sad tea and his even sadder cake, always the same cake. And his fingers all over the plate. Neither of them will touch it. The client pays. He has a right to rummage around under her skirt, but he has to enjoy himself without removing his hat or stopping the conversation. He plunges his fingers into her moss, turns them, agitates them, as strongly as he can. He wants his money's worth for his two pounds. He'd readily drink the liquid dribbling down, but that's enough. His case has been heard, he's thrown out. The waiter comes back, fingers the dish again, throws the tea on the ground. The client stammers. He has to do up his fly again and beat it on the double. Already the girl, very elastic, is hurtling down the stairs. The client, alone, becomes ashamed and afraid. He thinks he's been too much of a pig, that he'll be arrested. He's very relieved to get back into the air of the street... and our game of *manille* continues. The soldiers here, like everywhere in the world, salivate at the window and walk by spitting. I had really nothing to do except watch things. I was wary though. After three months of distraction here my ear was doing better – and they'd be sending me back to get shelled. Flanders was just six hours away. It made you think. Get to know the site well. Study. Maybe it would be better if I told you more about the place where this was happening. London isn't very far away, that's understood, but it's still pretty expensive when you don't have the right addresses to get settled, especially for food, which is so often depressing. That annoys the traveller, it frightens him. The chips are especially revolting. In short, you have to be well informed. But the neighbourhood I'm telling you about has changed enormously. You