The Drug Clerk

*Tietjens, Eunice, 1884-1944*

The drug clerk stands behind the counter,
Young and  dapper, debonair . . . .

Before him burn the great unwinking lights,
The hectic stars of city nights,
Red as hell's pit, green as a mermaid's hair.
A queer half acrid smell is in the air.
Behind him 'on the shelves in ordered rows
With strange abbreviated names
Dwell half the facts of life.
That young man knows
Bottled and boxed and powdered here
Dumb tragedies, deceptions, secret shames,
And comedy, and fear.

Sleep slumbers here, like a great quiet sea
Shrunk  to this bottle's compass, sleep that brings
Sweet respite from the teeth of pain
To those poor tossing things
That the white nurses watch so thoughtfully.
And here again
Dwell the shy souls of Maytime flowers
That shall make sweeter still those poignant hours
When wide-eyed youth looks on the face of love.
And, for those others who have found too late
The bitter fruit thereof,
Here are cosmetics, powders, paints—the arts
That hunted women use to hunt again
With scented flesh for bait.
And here is comfort for the hearts
Of  sucking babes in their first teething pain.
Here dwells the substance of huge fervid dreams,
Fantastic, many-colored, shot with gleams
Of ecstasy and madness, that shall come
To some pale twitching sleeper in a bunk.
And here is courage, cheaply bought
To cure a sick blue funk,
And dearly paid for in the final sum.
Here in this powdered fly is caught
Desire more ravishing than Tarquin's, rape
And bloody-handed murder.  And  at last
When the one weary hope is past
Here is the sole escape,
The little postern in the house of breath
Where pallid fugitives keep tryst with death.

All this the drug clerk knows, and there he stands,
Young and dapper, debonair . . .
He rests a pair of slender hands,
Much manicured, upon the counter there
And speaks: "No, we don't carry no pomade.
We only cater to the high-class trade."