

THE RED LANTERN

MY TWIN LILY-BUDS

IN that fantastic and incomprehensible old capital, Peking, there was, before the late Boxer uprising, perhaps no region more suggestive of lurking ills, of gloom, treachery, and ignominy, where fate skulks in sickly guise, than that lying beyond the Eastern Market Place under the shadow of the lofty Tartar Wall which divides the Manchu from the Chinese city. In this place of owls and bats and ruined tree-tops from which the moss hung like the beards of hoary demons, even the children seemed aged and misshapen, while their parents sitting apathetically in sunken doorways looked like mummies partially revived.

On one of the streets in this quarter that seemed more palsied with age if possible than the others, so crooked and uncertain were its meanderings, so feeble its current of life, a coffin shop stood out between a coalyard and joss house, like an impish leer at the death-in-life about it. And in the scene that was being enacted in the courtyard behind it, irony completed itself. For a woman like an ancient chronicle in wax, seared, blackened, almost mildewed by time, came blinking out from one of the chambers of the quadrangle, supported by a burly fellow who led her gallantly enough towards a newly-made coffin.

"Hai! There, now, mother! What do you say to that? Five feet of good timber in the lid alone, joints not to be cracked open by a mallet, and all ready if you die to-night."