

CHAPTER I

THE BEGINNING

ONCE upon a time there was a Chinese novelist who spent all his working life in the writing of one story. He was a gentleman of independent fortune, so we have no reason to suppose him a fool. His heirs published his work in one hundred and two volumes. It has been read by at least three people, all of them imperial librarians, and is still highly respected in the Far East. It is a good story ; indeed, it is hundreds of good stories ; but as a monument to the conscientious scruples and energy of its author, rather than as a work of fiction, does it make its surest claim upon immortality.

I think of that honourable literary gentleman of China and his one-hundred-and-two-volume novel with sympathy and profound respect. The story popped into his head one day when he was enjoying the summer of the nineteenth year of his life. He sat down to dash it off on rice-paper, his inky brush trembling in his eager fingers ; and then he paused to reflect.

He turned the eyes of his mind inward,