

INTRODUCTION

1.

THE biographers of Gray (and for a man who lived such an uneventful life he has had a great many) give much space to his early letters to Walpole and their two friends of the 'Quadruple Alliance' at Eton. This partiality is not hard to understand: the letters of Gray, Walpole, West, and Ashton bring back the friendships of one's own school days, or, rather, glorify them; what other schoolboys ever put into letters so much humour, criticism, sentiment, and affection? These precocious boys—of whom one was to write the most beloved poem of the century and another to give posterity the history of his time—admit us into their company. As we read their letters we are mindful of what the ministers of fate had in store for the writers, and the reading is wistful and pleasant and sad.

Gray, West, and Walpole had much in common: literary tastes, physical slightness, an aversion to games, and the circumstance, probably felt rather than discussed, that they came from unhappy homes. No boys can ever have enjoyed their school more; perhaps no boys of a literary cast ever enjoyed it as much. They did not suffer from the persecution which often afflicts such boys at school. Being 'literary' was not offensive to 'normal' Etonians of their time, since the normal Etonians, the bloods and future M.P.'s, also turned out verses; they were, indeed, 'the mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease.' The Quadruple Alliance also had the advantage of having Walpole, although the youngest of the four, as their leader. He assumed that rôle inevitably, not because he was the Prime Minister's son—however aware masters and tutors may have been of the relationship, not many of his contemporaries were sycophants—but because he was gay and gregarious and had a gift for friendship. Walpole had other intimates of a quite different character from Gray and West, Montagu and