

SHEPHERDS IN SACKCLOTH by *Sheila Kaye-Smith* (HARPERS. \$2.50)

NOR since we read *Joanna Godden* has a novel by Sheila Kaye-Smith touched us more poignantly than this latest romance of hers—*Shepherds in Sackcloth*. Once more she uses as background that countryside, deep pastoral Surrey, which is as surely hers as modern London is Galsworthy's. For stage she takes a shabby rectory with its garden and its environs, and throws upon it the interwoven story of young love—passionate, forbidden, doomed—and the inner religious conflict of an old English priest. Quietly, with exquisite characterization and perfect rhythm, her people, the sweet and holy rector and his wife, Theresa of the flaming hair and the child's heart, George, the strange ungainly revivalist who cannot resist the appeal of Theresa's loveliness, move with classic tread to inevitable tragedy.

There is never in this writer's work anything sensational either in her premises or in her story's development. But then, there is nothing sensational about the progress of most human lives as they are lived off the front pages of our daily press. Here, in this book, as in millions of spots on earth, the business—pitiful and gorgeous—of daily existence is established. The design of the plot forms itself out of the very soil with apparent unconsciousness. This, of course, is the acme of fine technique. Theresa, sacrificing her life for the ecstasy of a scarcely comprehended passion, is a figure that stands out clearly defined. She is real. We feel, as we read, a desire to protect and warn her—no small achievement for any author. The theological controversies which form part of the problems of the two men—the rector, and George, the "vagabond shepherd of a flock of goats"—cast interesting sidelights on the unceasing questions which harry the Church of England; and on all counts the author's religion is tolerant, human, wise, and adds to the novel an atmosphere of substance and

significance. Sheila Kaye-Smith, an English novelist of the highest rank, is a person to be thankful for, and one whose compassionate criticism of life deserves wide consideration.

LYNN ANDERSON

THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER by *Vernon Bartlett* (STOKES. \$2.00)

THE co-author of *Journey's End* knows war at its truest. He knows its brutish boredom and futility, its senseless monotony and perverseness. In *The Unknown Soldier*—a finely conceived and in spots successfully depicted tragedy—he has chosen a nameless hero to typify the countless millions of unheroic ordinary beings who carry on its business.

Architectonically the work is simple. The hero is ordered to lead a raid on a German trench to capture some prisoners. While preparations are in progress, a German private falls into the hands of an English patrol. The raid is called off. But the cancellation order reaches its final destination three minutes after the raiding-party has gone over the top without the customary protective barrage. The hero, gravely wounded, awakens in a shell-hole where he must wait until dusk to be picked up by his men. The long agonizing wait provides the psychological background on which, as upon a screen, the hero's consciousness, his memories, reactions and ratiocinations are thrown.

While yet a child the hero was told by a gypsy fortune-teller that "the great men of the world would bow down before him". His one ambition had been to fulfil that prophecy. War taught him the crushing truth that "the individual does not count". Yet at every instant, even amidst the cruel insensibilities of war, the individual is forever preoccupied with himself, his dreams, his fears, his illusions about his destiny. It is this that gives our hero the strength and courage to anticipate his rescue. After sundown he drags himself over to his trench, is mistaken for a German and shot by his own comrades. The

nameless hero, by implication, becomes the Unknown Soldier, the embodiment of anonymity, of impersonality, of sacrifice, before whom, indeed, the great of the earth bow down. But above this tragic irony of fate it is suggested that the Unknown Soldier is a fiction which civilized creatures have invented to gain vicarious atonement for and absolution from their personal blame in an ungodly and inhuman business.

LOUIS RICH

THE PATRIOT'S PROGRESS by *Henry Williamson* (DUTTON. \$2.50)

THE World War has been presented to us, in the past two years, from all angles—as it was seen in France or Gallipoli, in Russia or South Africa, in the trenches or from the air, according to the points of view of privates or sub-alterns, aviators or orderlies, nurses or non-combatants. When the saturation point in war literature will be reached, or if it has already been reached, one does not know. But it seems certain, at any rate, that this really fine war novel by Henry Williamson has been brought to birth much too late to receive the attention it manifestly deserves. In spite of the clarity and competence with which Mr. Williamson approaches his subject, the reader can hardly be blamed for finding this Odyssey of a British private faintly repetitious.

John Bullock, the unheroic and commonplace hero of *The Patriot's Progress*, is a London clerk, an honest and unimaginative youth who hastened to enlist at the outbreak of the war for fear that the hostilities might end before he had had any fun. Insignificant and rather stolid, he permitted himself to be shunted through bewildering months of training, without questioning in his own mind the essential wisdom or justice of anything which fell to his lot. He learned physical hardship, humiliation, the loss of his personal privacy. In France he endured the strain of uncertainty and the emotional ravages wrought by the more or less constant immi-

nence of death. He went through a nightmare of a hopeless attack, was wounded, and had a leg amputated in a field hospital. Restored to a mockery of health, he was sent back to England on crutches.

The effect of the war upon his healthy, un-inquisitive animal organism is horrible and inescapable. Neither a hero nor a coward, equipped neither for reflection nor revolt, John Bullock remains a perfect epitome of the commonplace, a median line drawn through humanity's dead level. His tragedy lies, in part at least, in his very uncomplaining incomprehension of his own tragedy. Told with a cold, unsparing objectivity, his story achieves a power which would have eluded a more purple writing. But the final touch of the book, magnificently and artistically conclusive as it is, is nevertheless out of character. On Armistice Day, an officious gentleman, inquiring into the loss of Bullock's leg, says to him: "We'll see that England doesn't forget you fellows". Not unkindly, but with crushing brevity, Bullock replies, "We are England".

MARGARET WALLACE

HYMN TO THE SUN by *Malcolm Ross* (SCRIBNER'S. \$2.50)

THE coast of Labrador associated vaguely with Eskimos and missionaries, seems hardly the locale for any sort of grand passion, yet Mr. Ross has managed to make it very much a land of human emotions.

Were it not for the setting, the story would lack any unusual quality, for the plot itself is the eternal triangle, a married woman, her husband and "the other man". In Labrador, however, the conflict becomes a struggle of man against nature, as well as man with man.

Tom Steele, yachting with friends along the Labrador coast, sees and immediately falls in love with the young wife of the missionary doctor. She is lonely, and in a weak moment responds to his kiss. After a disagreement with his host, Steele makes superhuman efforts to leave the yacht and re-