

BLACKFRIARS

THE BOOK OF TALBOT. By Violet Clifton. (Faber & Faber; 15/-.)

This is an extraordinary book about an extraordinary man. It is the history of Talbot Clifton's travels written by his widow from the diaries which he kept. The odyssey of this great traveller is described with the most passionate enthusiasm and his immense strength, endurance and courage, as depicted in Mrs. Clifton's narrative, seem scarcely human. The spirit in which the book is written is epitomized in the dedication, which is 'To God for Talbot'; it is the saga of a hero of almost mythical accomplishments. Yet there is very much in this book besides Mrs. Clifton's enthusiasm to convince us of the unusual qualities of Talbot Clifton. The mere enumeration of his travels, their location on the map; his venturing alone amongst the Eskimos of the Barren Lands and the Tunguses of the Lena Archipelago; his valour in hunting wild animals, as when he killed single-handed the immense bear which had terrorised the population round Verkhoyansk in Siberia; his arresting appearance—'a man like a Viking who walked down Bond Street as though he were breaking a trail' was the description given by a friend—all these are evidence of his unusual character and commanding personality.

Moreover the heroic in him was combined with a love for the arts. He was an accomplished flautist; his playing brought tears to the eyes of the Eskimos and joy into the hearts of the Tunguses, and even the seals in the waters round Islay, his island home, came to listen to the strains of his pipings. In all his travels a volume of Shakespeare was his constant companion and in the Arctic twilight he meditated the philosophy of Schopenhauer.

In his houses in England, Ireland and at Islay he proved a most generous landlord and a delightful host, but his joy was always to be in the wilderness. His wife so describes him: 'He was full of wonder: at man; at strange places; at beauty hidden, unknown, and remote; wonder goaded him on through the earth regardless of his body. Of that quality-vision of saint-word of poet; and by its power, is straitened the explorer, that cannot take, from another, the tale of the earth's grandeur, but must, himself, go forth, marvelling at the unknown.'

The writing of this book is uneven, but in places it so far transcends most current literature that it must be ranked as a classic. There is a lyric quality in some of the descriptive passages which startles the mind as with a vision of the thing described, but no part of the book is so moving as the account of Talbot Clifton's illness and death. There is in these last chapters such a poignant sincerity, such power of desperation as to give them the grandeur of real tragedy.

E.H.