

Truly An Impressive Work

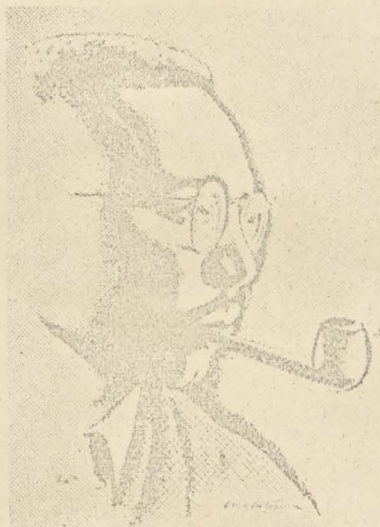
THE LEOPARD by —

Victor S. Reid. Heinemann.
IN WEST INDIAN literary

history 1949 is a date to be remembered. In that year a novel by a new writer appeared simultaneously in the U.S.A. and in Britain. It was the first of the West Indian postwar novels and was destined to mark a turning point in our writing. Instead of one or two writers practically unknown outside their own islands the West Indian novelists were now to come crowding thick and fast on the steps of this pioneer author who had attracted attention in the world outside of the Caribbean. The book was, of course, *New Day* by Vic Reid.

The year 1958 may be another landmark in West Indian writing and again the author to make the landmark is Victor Stafford Reid. The book is his latest and only his second to be published — *The Leopard*—published in Britain by Heinemann and in the USA by Viking Press.

In a broadcast a few weeks ago, Philip Sherlock referred to the fact that West Indians were grow-



he thinks, will almost certainly have a rifle. Nebu decides to take possession of this rifle and follows the new track.

On the new trail Nebu thinks of his life before joining the Mau Mau and we learn that he used to work as house boy to a white man named Gibson and his young wife. One one occasion while Nebu was alone in the house the rains, long awaited, had come at last and Nebu in his joy had tossed off all his clothes and danced naked. Mrs. Gibson returned unexpectedly with

her clothes sticking to her as she had been caught in the sudden downpour. She saw the naked Nebu dancing and a spark of passion flamed between the two. They yielded to it and nine months later a son was born. Gibson knew at once that it was not his child and that the father was Nebu. In his rage he killed the mother while Nebu watched from outside and then ran away.

AFTER we are given the knowledge of what had happened years ago, Nebu reaches the end of the trail; he catches up with the white man. It turns out to be Gibson himself. The shock unnerves Nebu for a moment and in that moment Gibson has time to fire his gun. Nebu is wounded but kills Gibson and so gets possession of the rifle. Nebu discovers that Gibson was not alone; with him was the young boy that had been born to his wife, Nebu's son.

Nebu knows that he had wronged the white man by deceiving him with his wife and thus must make requital. There is a price to be paid but the young boy must first be returned to the

white people. The wounded Nebu and the boy set out on the journey and soon they are not alone, as they are followed by a leopard. The leopard smells Nebu's festering wound and knows that here will be easy hunting as the wounded man will grow weak. The story of the requital for Nebu's sin is told in the journey.

Vic Reid has told this simple tale in — to quote a review in an English paper — 'hauntingly beautiful' language. More than that, he has got into the mind of the African Nebu and the reader is able to trace for himself the forces which move Nebu. The reader does not merely see the hero, as in so many West Indian books, meeting with incident after purposeless incident. This is a very thoughtful book. The author, correctly, does not discuss the overall picture of the reasons for the disturbance in Kenya, and only once is a comment made about the land of the Africans having been taken away. This is slightly irritating as both the reader and for Nebu the immediate present is what matters. The background which has caused Nebu to be in this position is not of moment. But this is a very minor point and should not be held against the author, particularly as it occurs only once.

A criticism has been made that the coincidence in meeting Gibson is too unreal. This is not a valid criticism; had the meeting been at the end of the book the point would have been well taken. As it is, if the white man had not been Gibson there would have been no story. It is after meeting Gibson that the real story is unfolded and certainly the reader has been prepared for it by Nebu's having thought about his previous employer and made him real to the reader. The author had with great skill set the scene for the meeting with Gibson.

There is one point which may be a trifle upsetting when you first meet it. The author describes the little half-bred boy not as brown which we in Jamaica would expect, but as grey. Poetic licence, perhaps, and there must be a very good reason for this — maybe the overseas market. Undoubtedly Vic Reid has shown himself to be too careful a writer for this to be an oversight but it may puzzle you.

Vic Reid has served notice on the world that whatever is of interest to him, no matter where it occurs, is subject for his creative ability. We do not want to see our authors forsaking the Caribbean and seeking plots elsewhere but if they can write like Vic Reid the world is open to them and the world will benefit from their roaming far afield.

By ERIC CODDLING

ing up culturally, and cited as an instance of this the fact that Vic Reid had sought the subject matter of his new book in Africa. This may be an overstatement but there is a point in it. However the significant thing about *The Leopard* is that here is a book by a West Indian which is not a mere travelogue, a description of West Indian life thinly covered by a skimpy plot; it is literature. It may be destined to be required reading and may become a classic. It is truly an impressive work.

VIC REID has chosen for the plot of his new book an incident in the Mau Mau rising in Kenya. His hero, Nebu, is an African, one of a band of Mau Mau who have just sacked and burnt a white settler's home — "made beautiful" the settlers as Nebu thinks of the slaughter. The band possesses only a few rifles and Nebu is not one of the lucky rifle owners. It is important for him to have one and as he thinks this he sees a track leading away from the direction in which the band is moving. He examines the track and sees that it is that of a white man who

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