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Vic Reid makes triumphant return...

BOOK REVIEW

THE LEOPARD — V. S. Reid
—185 pages — Heinemann
by George Paulon

NINE years ago the appearance of "New Day" by Vic Reid of Jamaica was hailed with enthusiasm. It marked a new phase in West Indian writing.

The older generation, H. G. deLisser, C. L. R. James and Alfred Mendes of Trinidad, were almost unknown to the young people of the Caribbean who did not associate West Indians with writing ability. Then came "New Day" to be followed by book after book from all over the Caribbean. But in the midst of this upsurge of new talent the fore-runner of it all was apparently on the sidelines. No new books came from Vic Reid while Mittelholzer, Lamming, Seron, Mais, Hearne, became household words. It required more than the fingers of two hands to count the West Indian novels and soon to count the authors themselves. Many began to say that Reid was a 'one-book' man and that his success was a flash in the pan.

Last year there was brief mention in the Gleaner that Vic Reid had a new book which was appearing in the U.S.A. and in Great Britain. It dealt, we were told, with Kenya and the Mau Mau. "Ridiculous!" said some of us. "What does Reid know of Kenya, of Africa?" Others, more cautious, suggested that if Reid was a real writer he could write on any topic that moved him sufficiently. Many were not convinced.

Now "The Leopard" is off the press and the cautious ones are completely justified. Vic Reid is indeed a writer's very good one, and

"The Leopard" is a terrific tour de force. Reading it is a joy. It is poetic prose written by the Vic Reid who gave us the first part of "New Day". You cannot compare other West Indian novels with this. That is not to say that it is better. They really cannot be compared. This is quite a different kettle of fish. The others, in nearly every case, are descriptive of the life, scenery, customs of the West Indies. This one deals with human emotions, almost in a single incident and Vic Reid handles it like a true poet. The fact that the set in Kenya is unimportant. The situation needs Africa as a setting, true, but only as poetic background. One thing is certain. You cannot from now on mention West Indian writers without putting Vic Reid back in the picture, up among the leaders.

But let us tone down our enthusiasm and tell you what the book is about. Nebu, a Kikuyu (or half-Kikuyu, half-Maasi) is with a roving band of Africans who have been pillaging the white settlers. He packs a rifle. They cross the trail of a white man and Nebu reasons that the man will possess a rifle. He leaves the band and follows the new trail. He meets up with the white man, discovers that he is his previous employer but still kills him so as to get the rifle.

But the man was not alone. With him was his little son. His son in name, that is, because Nebu is really the father of the child, the result of a sudden, unrepeatable episode with the white woman. With the little boy Nebu sets out to rejoin the band. His wound gets worse and soon they are followed by a leopard who knows that Nebu will gradually get too weak to resist him. The little boy is young in years but old as the hills in evil — evil, not-mischievous.

Nebu, knowing that he had wronged his white employer is convinced that he must do penance, or make reparation as he puts it, and the evil he sees in the boy he accepts as part of the scheme of things until re-

quital can be made. The couple make their way back until the leopard strikes.

That is all the story — a singleness on the part of Nebu and the working out of his punishment. It is very well told, simply and yet with many poetic and striking images. It will move you and tear you with the slow physical decay of Nebu. This is a book to own. Borrowing it from your friends is not enough. You won't want to return it. It gets full marks from your reviewer.

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Sunday C. April 6, 1958