

TRAPPED IN ABANDONED BUILDING BY A RIVAL GANG ON STREET (PAGE 101), RED JACKSON PONDERES HIS NEXT MOVE

# Harlem Gang Leader

## Red Jackson's life is one of fear, frustration and violence

Photographs for LIFE by Gordon Parks

The tower in the upper right-hand corner of this page belongs to New York City's famous Riverside Church. Stretching off to the left of it are the classic buildings of Columbia University and the elegant apartments of some of the city's leading citizens. Nestled just below these, under the smoke and haze, are the crowded tenements and the cluttered, dreary streets of Harlem, the U.S.'s biggest Negro community. Here 500,000 people live, crammed into a ghettolike section built originally to hold less than half that number. Schools, like housing, are crowded and run-down, and at the close of each day overworked teachers

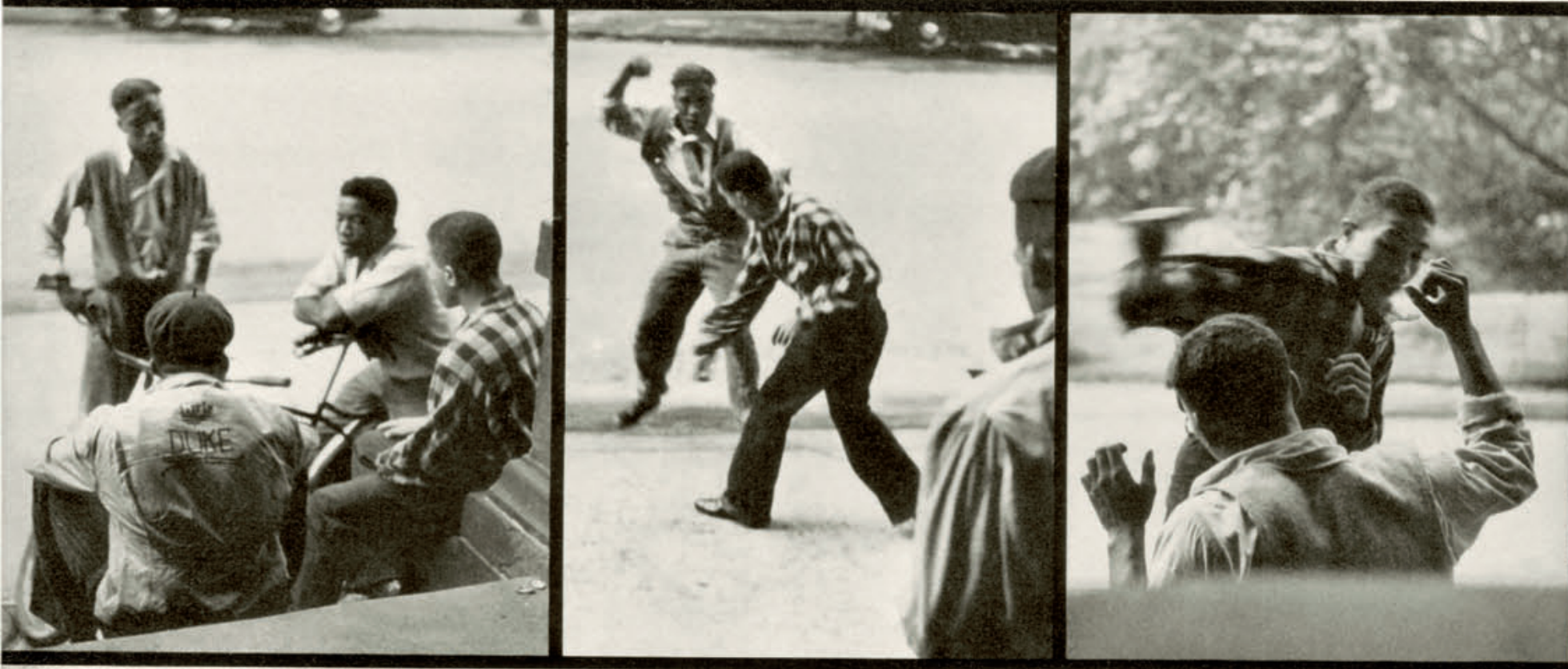
are glad to turn their restless pupils back into the streets. With little to do but roam around, the children often band together into street gangs—at their best, organized athletic teams, at their worst, roving bands of hoodlums held together by a common spirit of rebellion and a need for security. Leonard ("Red") Jackson, 17, is the tough and successful leader of such a gang.

When he was about 12, Red got tired of getting beaten up by older boys in the block and of paying "protection" in order to get to school. And when he was hungry, which was often, he needed a little help in stealing apples from the side-

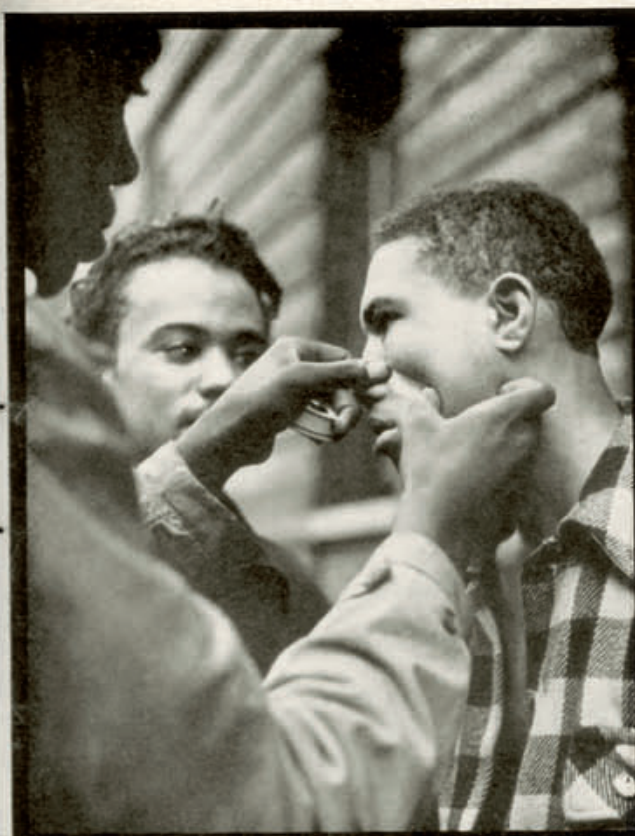
walk stands. So he joined a gang for self-protection and for a chance to express his own personal defiance.

Red's gang fights other Harlem gangs like itself. Their acts of violence are no worse than those of white gangs in Brooklyn and other sections of the city, but with more to be frustrated about, and to fear, they have helped to give Harlem one of the highest delinquency rates in the nation. The photographs on these and the following pages are by Gordon Parks, a young Negro photographer who won Red Jackson's confidence and then stuck with him for four hectic weeks to make a chronicle of Red's unhappy life.





RED (IN CHECKERED SHIRT) HAS AN ARGUMENT WITH SONNY HOLLIS (STANDING, LEFT), HIS "WAR COUNSELOR," AND SLUGS IT OUT WITH HIM TO MAINTAIN AUTHORITY



RED WINS, GETS FIRST AID FOR A SMALL SCRATCH



In the tiny neighborhood candy store (above), which is the center of his gang's evening recreation, Red "slow drags" with one of his girl friends.

Red holds ball of yarn (below) while his mother listens to the radio and knits a table mat. Older brother Arthur practices his hobby of sketching.



Red (standing, right) supervises painting of bicycles belonging to his gang. "Brother" Price, in foreground, is Red's cousin and assistant gang leader.

In the summertime the boys ride all over Manhattan for fun, and each year they paint their bikes with distinctive new colors, add new accessories.

## Red's gang is called the Midtowners . . .

. . . and Red, so named because of his reddish hair and freckles, is its duly elected president. His cousin, "Brother" Price, is his assistant gang leader or vice president, and Sonny Hollis is his "war counselor." When a fight or "rumble" with another gang is imminent, Sonny is boss. As the tactical expert it is his job to evaluate the immediate situation and to decide whether it calls for a fight or just diplomatic negotiation (p. 102). But in all other matters Red is the undisputed leader.

Until he was hurt by a bus last Easter, Red was a scrappy Golden Gloves boxer who had lost only two bouts. He is still a formidable fighter and sometimes has to defend his authority against the premature attempts of fellow gang members like Sonny Hollis (above) to challenge his leadership and take over the presidency. In addition to having physical prowess, Red is a shrewd and quick-thinking leader who takes the initiative in all the gang's activities, from arranging to play stickball for money (at \$3 a game) with friendly gangs to fixing up its flashy bicycles (left).

The hierarchy of the Midtowners gang is rigidly divided into six groups according to age and experience. Starting with the Tiny Tims, who are 12-year-old beginners, its members graduate through the ranks of Kids, Cubs, Midgets and Juniors to the status of Seniors who, at the age of 30, are usually inactive alumni. Red, now a Midget, has led the most active Midtowners since 1946, when their former president was jailed for shooting a member of a rival gang. Each gang operates in a neighborhood where most of its members live. Red himself lives on 99th Street, but he keeps his Midtowners concentrated in a block on 119th, so that his mother (right) can walk her dog in the 99th Street neighborhood in peace.







IN MORTUARY RED AND HERBIE LEVY STUDY WOUNDS ON FACE OF MAURICE GAINES, A BUDDY OF THEIRS WHO WAS FOUND DYING ONE NIGHT ON A HARLEM SIDEWALK



RED AND "BUDDY" LOOK WORRIED LEAVING MORTUARY

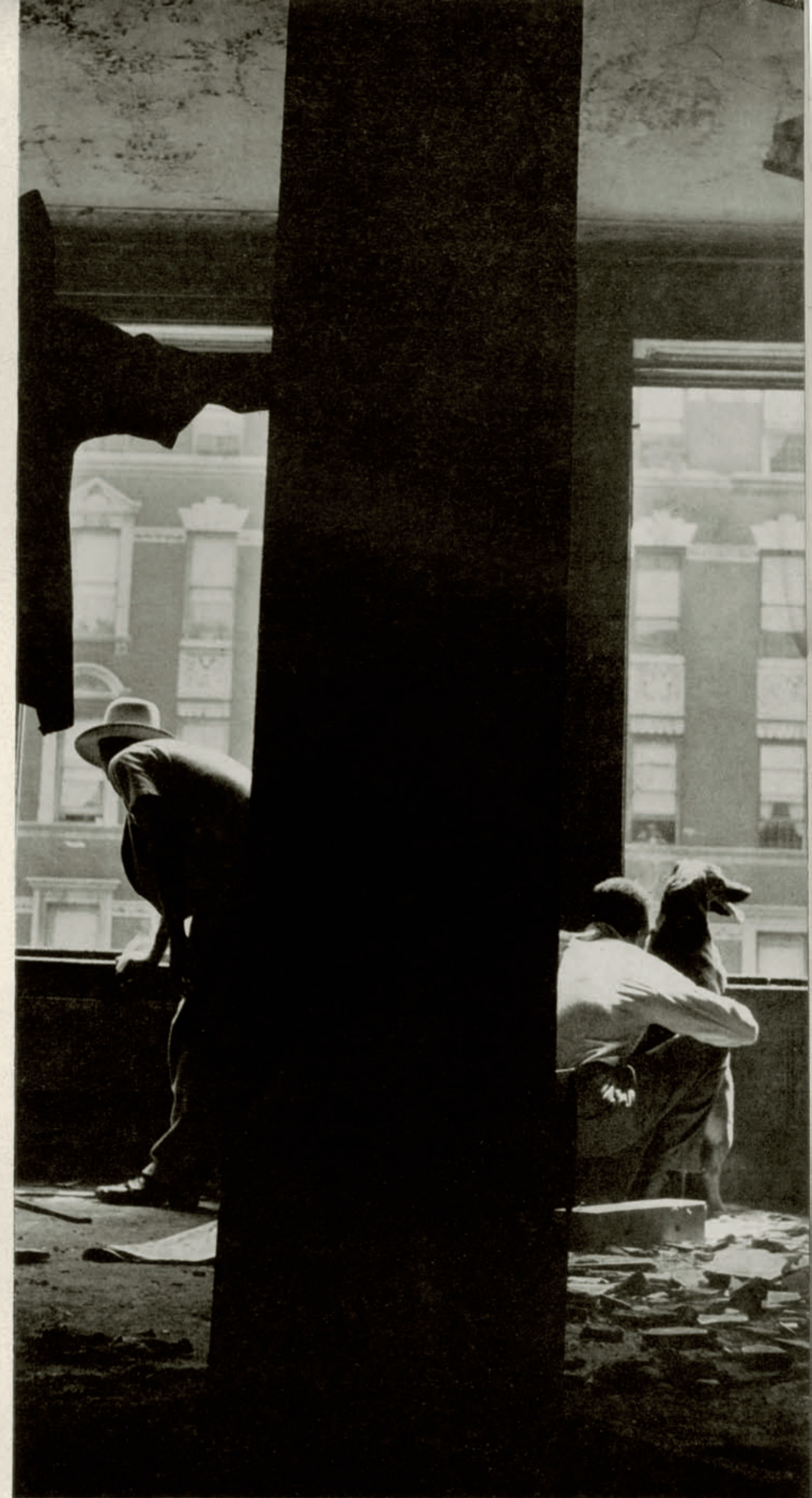
"We went to a chapel to see a dead pal...

... says Red, referring to the picture at left. The pal was Maurice Gaines, 15, who belonged to a friendly gang called the Nomads. The Nomads had fought as allies with the Midtowners for years, and when Gaines was found dying on a Harlem sidewalk the police decided it was an accidental death. But Red and "Little Buddy" (above), the Nomad leader, were sure that a rival gang had done the job and went to the mortuary with their friends to confirm their suspicions by studying the cuts around Gaines's lips and the lumps and bruises on his head and face.

"When we come out of the chapel," Red continues, "Herbie Levy saw some fellows coming up the street lookin' like they was after us. We ran into an old house that was empty and went upstairs to hide out. We all grabbed some bricks and stones and hid behind the windows ready to fight if we had to. None of us had any guns. Herbie's dog, he ran out on the ledge and we was scared he would give us away. But pretty soon a big crowd saw what was going on and stood around down in the street until the cops came by and the other guys ran away and we went on home. We sure wasn't ready for a fight that day."



NOMAD HOLDS BRICK DURING SIEGE IN OLD HOUSE



RED AND FRIENDS HIDE IN SHADOWS WHILE THEY SCAN STREET FOR RIVAL GANG. HERBIE RESTRAINS HIS DOG



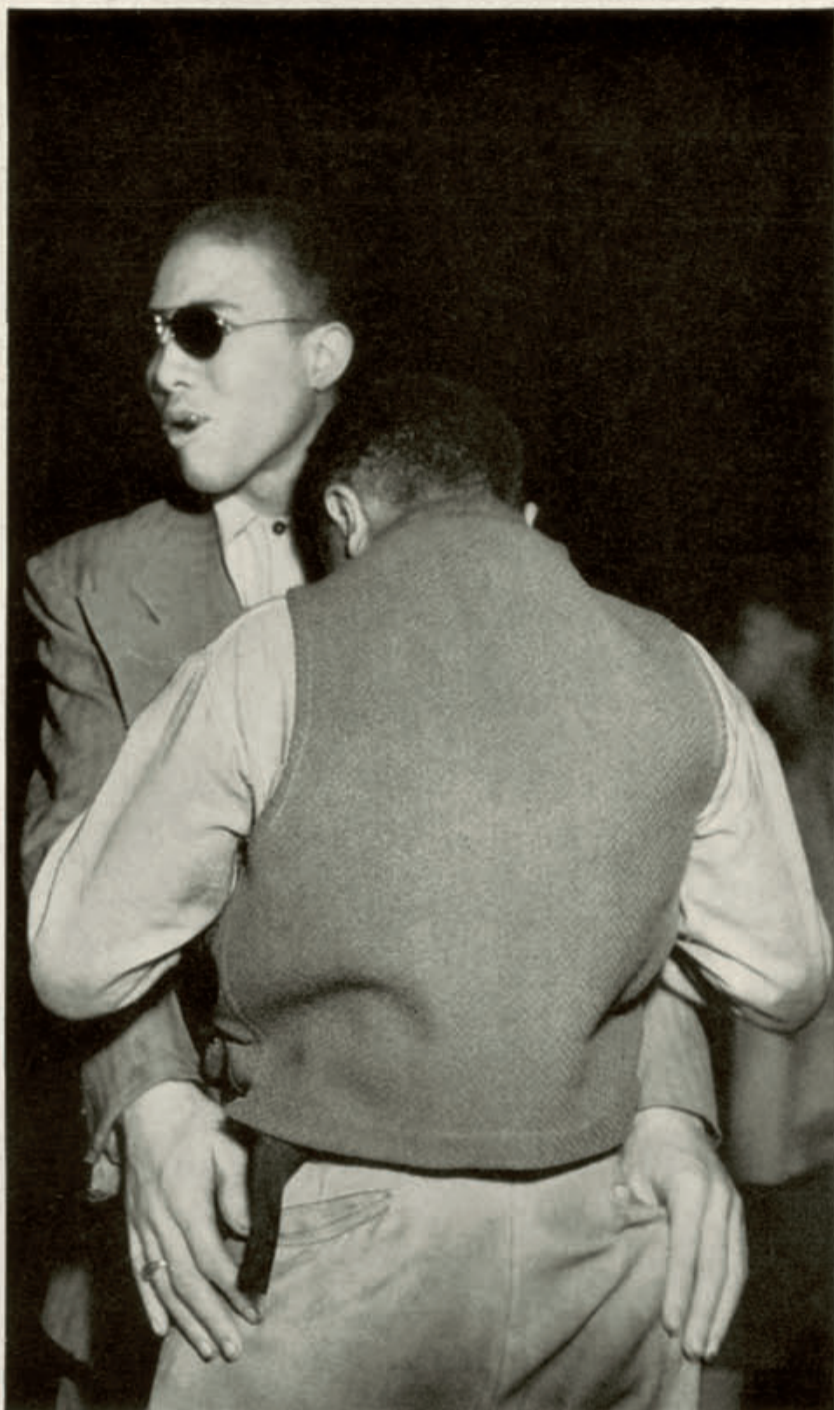
# "We held a war council when we got back . . .

. . . to our block," relates Red, "and I told the fellows that we shouldn't fight, but that we might have to if somebody was really after us, the way it looked. 'Tito,' another of our fellows, was in the hospital with cuts and bruises all over him. He was found in the railroad yards, and the cops said he'd been hit by a train, but we knew better than that. If we can, we let the cops settle things like this. If they can't we naturally put down some kind of action ourselves."

In the anarchy of youthful Harlem a gang fight can easily start over the swiping of a 50¢ pair of dark glasses, and once one of Red's buddies was killed over the theft of a small white hat. Red himself has a bullet wound in his left leg, the result of a sudden flare-up several years ago when one of his Midtowners started a fight because a member of another gang stepped on his shoeshine.

The night following the episode in the empty house, Sonny, Red's war counselor, went into a rival gang's territory and arranged for a meeting with its leaders on a specified corner. Later that night Red and his staff kept the rendezvous, and when he noticed one of the rival gang members hanging back suspiciously, Red decided it was because he was carrying a gun. Red frisked him (right) but found nothing. A few nights later, not satisfied with the negotiations, both sides repeated this routine. This time two boys started some loud talk which ended in a fight. Immediately both gangs jumped in and fought with sticks and garbage-can lids (opposite page) until someone suddenly pulled a gun and the whole group scattered.

After that scuffle the tension eased up. But until Red finds out how Gaines died and who beat up Tito he and his fellows can never really relax



WEARING GLASSES AS BADGE OF LEADERSHIP, RED FRISKS BOY THOUGHT TO HAVE GUN



## Red describes his gang's worst fight . . .

"We have had a lot of fights that we called fun in our day," Red reminisces to some younger boys in his war council. "We had it one day when we had fellows coming at us from all directions. ZOOM! ZOOM! So we all ran after the bunch in front of us and let the guys in back of us chase us. We was grabbing garbage-can tops and sticks and things and making a lot of

noise and breaking out windows—PING-a-ling-a-ling! That kinda got them scared so they started firing at us. POW! PAM! POW! PAM! We kept on firing too. PAM! When we got tired of chasing the ones in front of us we made a switch turn and started chasing the ones in back. A lot of glass was breaking and that really made us sound vicious. The others finally quit it. We was really lucky. There was none of us got hurt that day."

IN A NIGHT BRAWL RED'S GANG BATTLES ANOTHER SUSPECTED OF KILLING THEIR BUDDY





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Harlem Gang Leader CONTINUED



In studio before "boy mayor" broadcast, Red shows new YMCA card to Jimmy Morrow, plain-clothesman whom Red respects for his fairness.

## Red tries to stop bloodshed but he gets little real help

Red Jackson doesn't spend all of his time fighting, by any means. He spends a good deal of it visiting his girl friends, and nearly every day he looks around for a job. For, as Red himself says, "You can't get sharp off fightin'. When you get old like me you know you can only be sharp by getting yourself a California wrap (fancy overcoat), a good job and a nice girl. I have watched and seen my fellows after they was shot and stabbed and that all happened just by being in a club. And if you're considered the worst one of the club you get killed first. There's no future in that."

Of course Red hasn't always felt like this. That he is beginning to change is due in part to the fact that he has found two men in Harlem upon whom he can depend for help. One is a cop, the other is an Episcopal minister. Plain-clothesman Jimmy Morrow (above) is one of a handful of police for whom Red has respect. From some he has learned to expect either threats or indifference. Jimmy's method, like that of some other young policemen in Harlem, is to give the boys a break, to try to cool off their wars before they start. The system is beginning to work—gangs are getting less vicious. Even Red now tries to keep his boys from robbing and has gone so far as to disband his troublesome girls' auxiliary. Two years ago Jimmy sent Red to the Tombs, New York's famous city prison, for possessing a gun. Jimmy wanted Red to find out for himself what jail was like. As Red describes his lesson now: "Some of the fellows think it's a good deal to get in jail, and they brag about it. Maybe they's only been South to visit their grandmother. They comes back and if you says,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 106



Father Bishop talks earnestly to Red and some of his Tiny Tims, reminds them of the day he caught Midtowners throwing bottles in front of church.

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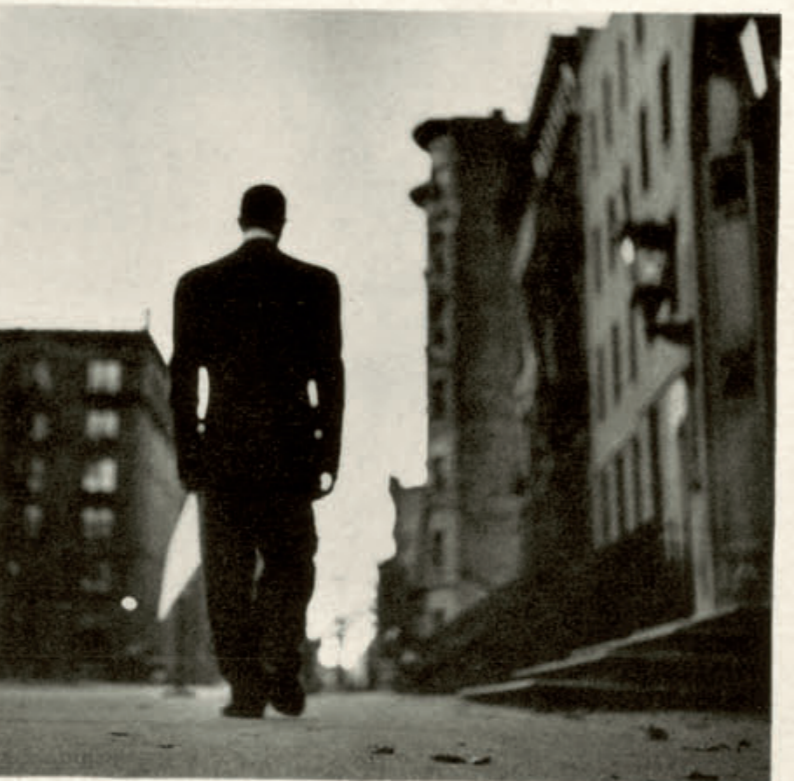
**Harlem Gang Leader** CONTINUED

"Where you been?" they says, "Gee, man, I been in jail. It's crazy [terrific] up there. You get steak and chicken and potato salad. . . ." So I went up and found out just how much chicken you do get. It's barley soup and cold cereal and powdered milk. When I come back somebody asked me, "Where you been, Red?" and I said I been South to visit my grandmother. I was ashamed to say I been to jail."

But there is more to Red's problem than learning that jail is no good. He finds it almost impossible to get a job that amounts to much more than low-grade janitor or messenger work, and where better jobs can be had either the employers or the unions are usually prejudiced against him. Even worse than these frustrations is the fact that like other Harlem boys Red has almost no one to talk to about his doubts, fears and troubles before they boil over into mischief and violence. He hasn't seen his father in about four years. His teachers were always too busy or too disinterested to notice him, and he quit school after junior high and one year of trade school. Besides Jimmy, almost the only other real friend he has is Father Bishop, rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, in the heart of Harlem. When Father Bishop caught Red and his gang throwing bottles in the street a few years ago, he called them in for a talk. Red found that the clergyman was a friend who would stick up for him, listen to his problems and explain right and wrong realistically.

One day last month, a few days after the fight shown on the preceding pages, a strange thing happened to Red. A Harlem movie theater cooked up a "youth program" and asked the police to provide a Harlem boy with poise and leadership to talk to its audience about delinquency. Jimmy Morrow was asked to name a boy. He suggested that Red, who had played ball with him in trying to reduce bloodshed, should get the spotlight. Red was glad to help out Jimmy, but he was pretty cynical about the proceedings, which included making him "boy mayor" of Harlem for a day, appearing on a radio broadcast and riding around in a parade in one of two big Buicks provided for the spectacle by a publicity-wise Negro businessman. Red's cynicism about the stunt was soon justified. He got a Y.M.C.A. membership card but found that it wasn't any good until he paid his dues. He had to laugh when the announcer introduced him over the air as a "crime fighter." He wondered what his rival gang leaders would think of that. When he visited his office-for-a-day to pose for newsreels no one paid the slightest attention to him until the cameramen arrived, when all the officials began to pat him on the back and hand him keys to the city. After the parade was over and all the pictures were taken, Red was let out on the sidewalk at lunchtime, and the big Buicks were driven off without a word about a ride home or a nice lunch for "His Honor." Red walked the 25 blocks home alone and bought a hot dog with his own money to munch along the way.

When all was said and done Red could count the people—white or colored—who were seriously and practically interested in his troubles, on the fingers of one hand.



After being paraded around in style as Harlem's "boy mayor," Red walks 25 blocks home alone. He has few people he can turn to for sincere help.



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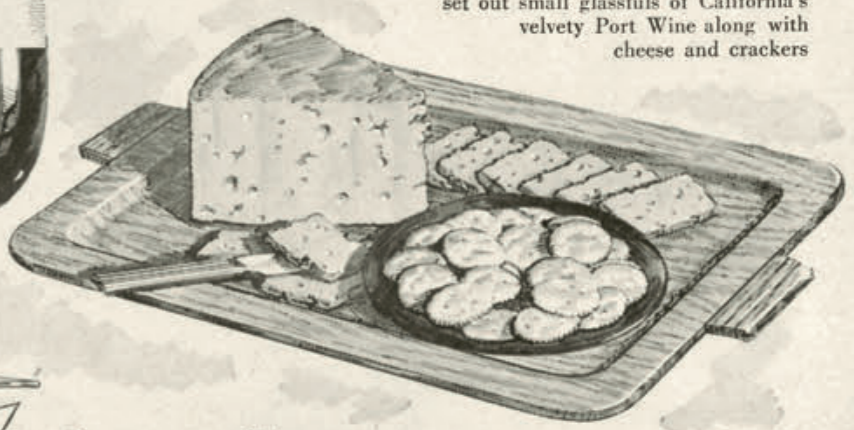
Of all American families who serve wine, seven out of eight choose the wines of California . . . for taste enjoyment

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