

THE TOY THAT KILLS: Woman's Home Companion – November 1950

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# THE TOY THAT KILLS

A boy's ordinary pocketknife isn't too dangerous. But a switchblade knife—ever seen one? Do you know how many youngsters carry them and what police officials think about this wicked new plaything? BY JACK HARRISON POLLACK

- None of us knows what the international situation will be tomorrow. Naturally, as long as American boys are fighting abroad that is of paramount concern to all of us.
- But even in wartime we must not lose sight of situations on the home front which need correction.
- As Jack Harrison Pollack's factual survey reveals, teen-agers are being killed needlessly by a gadget which should be brought under greater control. The WOMAN'S HOME COMPANION deserves thanks for publicizing such a problem.
- As spokesman for the nation's chiefs of police, I recommend this constructive article to thoughtful American women. By following its suggestions they can help immeasurably in protecting their communities from a new threat to the safety of many children.

[Signature of John M. Gleason]  
**JOHN M. GLEASON**  
 President, International Association of Chiefs of Police

**D**O YOU remember the days when firecrackers used to kill, burn and maim scores of youngsters every year? Aroused parents finally put a stop to it. They banded together all over the country to force the passage of local ordinances governing the sale and use of fireworks—and now a firecracker casualty is a rarity.

Today we are confronted with a new toy that kills. It's not yet so widespread as the firecracker menace once was. The toll up to now is relatively small—a few dozen children killed, somewhat more wounded. But the point is, all these unnecessary tragedies are increasing. Fireworks threatened only a few days a year; the new toy threatens every day of the three hundred and sixty-five. Fortunately this new menace can be controlled just as effectively as fireworks have been—if parents will just step in and do it.

This new threat to our children's safety is a pocket-knife called a switchblade. Never heard of it? Ask your boy, or your neighbor's boy. Thousands of thoughtless youngsters are carrying them.

Police officials, judges, teachers and social workers all over the country are disturbed about the increasing number of juvenile accidents in which switchblades figure. Now these authorities are not alarmists or bluenoses. They don't want to deny boys their pocket-knives. They know that a knife to a growing boy is as important as a lipstick to a young lady.

But they also know that a switchblade, which is fast replacing the old-fashioned pocketknife, is another story. Its chief purpose—as any crook can tell you—is for committing violence.

Have you ever seen one? Few women realize what a deadly weapon it can be. It isn't for practical use as is the Boy Scout or standard army knife with their two thick blades, can opener and combination bottle opener and screw driver.

No, a switchblade knife isn't as useful—but it's a lot *faster*. To open it, you merely press a button and instantly the blade darts out like a snake's tongue and locks firmly in that position. Any child can operate it easily with *one* hand. An ordinary penknife takes two hands and doesn't have a dagger-tip point.

What does this mean? Here is how one of the nation's top law-enforcement officers sums it up: "In a person's pocket, a switchblade knife is a deadly concealed weapon—as dangerous as a dagger and at close quarters as lethal as a loaded revolver." But unlike a revolver, you don't need a permit to carry it!

This is the wicked weapon which teen-agers in many communities are taking up as a fad!

The president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, John M. Gleason, told me, "Many otherwise well-informed parents—especially mothers—don't realize how vicious a switchblade can be."

I had no idea myself until I saw a youth stabbed with one on a Philadelphia street. Two young men were fighting with their fists. Suddenly one of them reached into his pocket. A second later his hand held an open knife. He jabbed the gleaming blade into his opponent's chest. As the blood flowed, women onlookers screamed.

While I watched the police take over, I could not help wondering if that stabbing really had to happen. How many hot-headed adolescents buy a switchblade just for show and then, in a moment of overwhelming anger, use it as a weapon?

Recently—in more innocent spirits—two teen-age boys at a high school dance in a Newark, New Jersey, suburb were playfully showing off with a three-inch switchblade. Accidentally one was shoved against the tip of the knife, which pierced his heart.

"You punctured me, Jim, please take me to a drugstore," the wounded youth moaned and collapsed.

His seventeen-year-old companion was aghast. But his sorrow couldn't bring his best friend back to life.

When another Newark high school boy was stabbed several days later, Public Safety Director John B. Keenan observed, "A mother who would be horrified if her son carried a pistol in his pocket thinks nothing of his having an equally dangerous knife."

"There is no excuse for anybody carrying a switchblade," declares Essex County Prosecutor D. E. Minard. "The sooner their manufacture and sale are banned, the better off we all will be," adds Newark Magistrate LeRoy D'Aloia. Boston Police Superintendent Edward W. Fallon warns, "No youngster should carry an automatic knife unless he's looking for trouble."

Every expert with whom I talked—including the nation's leading sportsmen—agreed that switchblade knives have no legitimate use in civilian life.

Yet I was amazed—and shocked—to find that nearly everywhere in America you, I or any youngster could walk into a store and [continued on page 88]



**THERE'S NOTHING ILLEGAL ABOUT MANUFACTURING OR SELLING THE KNIVES DISPLAYED HERE, BUT LOOK FOR TROUBLE WHEN A SWITCHBLADE GETS INTO A YOUNGSTER'S HAND**

#### WASHINGTON, D.C.

A perilous prize for these young men but easy to buy in the nation's capital

#### NEW YORK

Easy in New York City too, although a boy may have to lie about his age

#### MINNEAPOLIS

The choice in Minneapolis is good. Watch for the toll in the tabloids

#### CHICAGO

Chicago police deplore switchblade menace; youngsters get them anyway

#### LOS ANGELES

Of course these aren't meant for boys but Los Angeles boys will carry them

#### SEATTLE

And so the story goes—push-button knives aplenty all across the country

# The Toy That Kills

from page 39

buy a switchblade over the counter—no questions asked. True, some places have laws against selling "dangerous knives" to minors. But let's see how these laws work.

In New York a stale law forbids the sale or giving of any pushbutton knife with a blade over two and a half inches long to anyone under sixteen. But in New York City a thirteen-year-old boy recently gazed admiringly at a shiny window display of switchblade knives, daggers and stilettos. Me strolled into the highly respectable cutlery store and asked to see a four-inch switchblade, its point sharp as a rapier, its blade well honed.

"That's two dollars and ninety-five cents," the salesman said.

After ringing up the sale he casually remarked. "You're sixteen, aren't you?"

The thirteen-year-old who was average size for his age nodded and walked out with his perilous prize.

That same day in the same city another youngster critically stabbed a playmate with a switchblade. Was he any more to blame than his indifferent elders who sanctioned the murderous knickknack?

In Washington, D. C.—only a few knife-throws from the Department of Justice building—a fifteen-year-old boy recently told a storekeeper meaningfully, "I want a switch knife—the longest you got. I don't care about the price just so it's sharp."

The merchant nodded understandingly and sold him his knife.

The price and the patter may vary but you can make the same transaction in nearly any fair-sized community in America. Sample surveys show that it is as easy for a youth to buy a switch knife as a package of cigarettes. I chaperoned youngsters who purchased them for me—while I waited outside the store—in many communities and none had any difficulty. In some towns they're known as "spring-blades," "snap knives" or "swingback knives." Whatever the name, the article is the same.

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There's jeweler's polish in BRILLO

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"What do you use them for?" salesman asked.

"Shave pants, cut some anything," they replied.

"How are they better than ordinary pocketknives?"

"You don't break your fingernails opening them."

IN MY home town switchblades have been advertised as "Safety Push-button Knives." Pushbutton, yes. But safety? From a salesman warned me to be sure and keep the knife locked when not in use because his own switchblade had accidentally snapped open in his pocket and pinned his right leg.

Once while looking at switchblades in a Columbus store, I flipped innocently, asking, "Do you think this is an appropriate gift for my twelve-year-old nephew?"

"It's ideal," you couldn't get a boy that age a nicer present. I was amazed.

Later I watched my neighbor's ten-year-old twelve-year-old son empty his pocket into the familiar boyhood miscellany: pens, a ball, some nuts, gum, a surprising glass—and yes, a three-inch switchblade. When I expressed concern at his carrying such a weapon, he proudly showed me how to use it, jabbing at an imaginary enemy.

I couldn't help thinking of the twelve-year-old kid who was critically injured in the back lot last year outside his public school by an angry "switchblade" thrown from the hand of a classmate. Teachers in some areas take such knives from pupils before allowing them to enter class. Nevertheless some boys talked to tell me they avoid detection by slipping their knives into their shoes.

Why are these switchblades so popular with youngsters? One reason is that many scenes of their use are glorified in their own movies. Charles E. Kelly, former superintendent of Rhode Island State Police.

But one fourteen-year-old New Jersey boy got the idea otherwise. Last spring when a twelve-year-old classmate accidentally brought into him in school, he whipped out a handily switchblade knife, as someone put it, "yep."

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At almost the same time, in Newark, New Jersey, a thirty-five-year-old woman accused her husband of being unfaithful. Before she closed a closet in the secret study a switchblade from her stocking and caught her husband at the belt. The next day he died.

"If she had only hit her husband with a dash or a rolling pin instead," raised a public coroner on page 109.

held as the other boy." The victim later said, "I never saw the face—only his eyes."

"Why did you carry a switchblade knife in school?" the youthful mother was asked.

"For protection!" he defiantly replied. "I'm a couple of kids grabbed me with a switchblade, and I took thirty-three cents from me 'so the cook guy I work with—over one out of my sister's penny bank and bought me a switchblade."

Violence begins violence.

But wouldn't a juvenile court judge tell me, "It's only a short step from carrying a switchblade to using it?"

Can anything be said in defense of allowing youngsters to have these weapons? I interviewed manufacturers and spokesmen for the industry. This is their argument: "If you don't let kids have push-button knives, they'll find other weapons to commit their crimes with—see rocks, baseball bats, even bats. The sale of knives isn't to blame. It is the education of these unfortunate youngsters."

Authorities consider this false reasoning. Of course people will always manage to get hold of weapons to commit *premeditated* crimes, but if it is the accidental stabbing committed with the too hastily pocketknives that could be avoided by outlawing its manufacture. "Casualty crimes would never be committed if switchblades were banned," Assistant United States Attorney J. Warren Wilson stated in a Washington letter.

It may surprise you, but crime statistics everywhere show that knife crimes are far more trouble than guns. The ratio is as high as five to one in some jurisdictions. In the Chicago police records I was stated in fact how many crimes of violence involve switchblades. Most newspapers merely report a "knife stabbing," implying to tell you a switchblade was the culprit.

CLEVELAND recognizes the switchblade menace. Lt. Col. Capt. David K. Kirt of the Cleveland Police Department said, "I've seen hundreds and hundreds of switchblades, one-handed and two-handed, one-handed and two-handed knives. During the same period switchblades were responsible for one-fourth of our homicides; that of the knives were under twenty years old."

Chicago—especially on the South Side—has been harassed by switchblades. Many crimes result from trivial disputes," noted Virgil W. Peterson, director of the Chicago Crime Commission. "If the courts would be more making a legal to carry dangerous knives, crime would be greatly reduced."

Detroit's former Police Commissioner said, "In Whitehouse tried to outlaw switchblades several years ago—but the city council failed to approve the law. Last year Boston Police Captain Louis D'Amico asked a legislative committee to make possession of switchblades a criminal offense, but nothing was done."

In all my investigations I could find no good reason why anybody—parent or adult—should be legally allowed to carry a switchblade. It is a "perfect Father's Day gift," as one over-the-hill merchant claimed. Psychologists say that switchblades are the irresponsible hands of alcoholics and psychotic personalities can spell murder. Recently in Hempstead, New York, a young woman—she had survived off a list with his girl friend. Suddenly, without any reason, another passenger—a drunken forty-five-year-old stranger—grabbed the young man and plunged a four-inch switchblade into his chest, killing him dead instantly. With what was his sister's name with a long pocket knife out for dressmaking and so on. He carried a gun without a permit. Why use it to carry for her to roam the streets with a switchblade knife?

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Once while looking at switchblades in a Connecticut store, I feigned innocence, asking, "Do you think this is an appropriate gift for my twelve-year-old nephew?"

"It's ideal; you couldn't get a boy that age a nicer present," I was assured.

Later I watched my neighbor's tow-headed twelve-year-old son empty his pockets of the familiar boyhood miscellany: pennies, a ball, some nails, gum, a magnifying glass- and yes. a three-inch switchblade. When I expressed concern at his carrying such a weapon, he proudly showed me how to use it, jabbing at an imaginary enemy.

I couldn't help thinking of the twelve-year-old lad who was switch-knifed in the back last year outside his public school by an angry schoolmate to whom he refused to lend a dime.

Teachers in some areas take switch knives from pupils before allowing them to come to class. Nevertheless some boys I talked to told me they avoid detection by slipping their knives into their shoes.

Why are these switchblades so popular with youngsters? One reason is that many sources of their entertainment have glamorized them, charges Edward J. Kelly, former superintendent of Rhode Island State Police.

But one fourteen-year-old New Jersey boy got the idea elsewhere. Last spring when a twelve-year-old classmate accidentally bumped into him in school, he whipped out a handy switchblade and, as witnesses put it, "cut a hole in the other boy." The victim later said, "I never even saw the knife—I only felt it."

"Why did you carry a switchblade knife to school?" the youthful stabber was asked.

"For protection!" he defiantly replied. "A couple of kids jabbed *me* with a switch knife last week and look thirty-three cents from me! So the next day I took sixty-seven cents out of my sister's penny bank and bought *me* a switchblade."

Violence begets violence.

No wonder n juvenile court judge told me, "It's only a short step from carrying a switchblade to gang warfare."

Can anything be said in defense of allowing youngsters to have these weapons? I interviewed manufacturers and spokesmen for the industry. This is their argument: "If you don't let kids have push-

button knives, they'll only find other weapons to commit their crimes with—ice picks, baseball bats, even hatpins. The sale of knives isn't to blame. It is the education of these unfortunate youngsters."

Authorities consider this false reasoning. Of course people will always manage to get hold of weapons to commit *premeditated* crimes. But it is the *unintentional* stabbings committed with this too handy pocketknife that could be avoided by outlawing its manufacture. "Countless crimes would never be committed if switchblades were banned," Assistant United States Attorney J. Warren Wilson assured me in Washington.

It may surprise you. but crime statistics everywhere reveal that knives cause far more trouble than guns. The ratio is as high as five to one in some communities. In examining police records I was stunned to find how many crimes of violence revolve around a switchblade. Most newspapers merely report a "knife stabbing," neglecting to tell you a switchblade was the culprit.

CLEVELAND recognizes the switchblade menace. Listen to Captain David Kerr of the Homicide Detail: "Last year we had one hundred and sixty-nine stabbings, one hundred and forty of them with switchblade knives. During the same period switchblades were responsible for one fourth of our homicides. Half of the killers were under twenty- three."

Chicago—especially on the South Side—has been harassed by switchblades. "Many cuttings result from trivial disputes." reveals Virgil W. Peterson, director of the Chicago Crime Commission. "If the courts would enforce laws making it illegal to carry dangerous knives, crime would be greatly reduced."

Detroit's former Police Commissioner John H. Witherspoon tried to outlaw switchblades several years ago—but the city council failed to approve the ban. Last year Boston Police Captain Louis DiScssa asked a legislative committee to make possession of switchblade knives a criminal offense, but nothing was done.

In all my investigations I could find no good reason why anybody—yongster or adult— should be legally allowed to carry a switchblade. It's hardly a "perfect Father's Day gift," as one overzealous merchant claimed.

Psychiatrists warn that a switchblade in the irresponsible hands of alcoholics and psychopathic personalities can spell murder. Recently in Hempstead, New York, a young war-hero—who had survived three battle wounds—was quietly getting off a bus with his girl friend. Suddenly, without warning or reason, another passenger—a drunken forty-five-year-old stranger—grabbed the young man and plunged a four-inch switchblade into his chest, killing him almost instantly. Who was the killer? A man with a long police record for drunkenness and assault. He couldn't carry a gun without a permit. Why was it so easy for him to roam the streets with a switchblade knife?

At almost the same time, in Newark, New Jersey, a thirty-five-year-old woman accused her husband of being unfaithful. Before he had a chance to explain, she angrily yanked a switchblade from her stocking and stabbed her husband in the heart. The next day he died.

"If she had only hit her husband with a dish or a rolling pin instead!" mused a police

[continued on page 109]

# The Toy That Kills

from page 88

Official. "A switchblade isn't something for anybody with a temper to have." Newark has now declared all-out war against switchblades.

City and county law-enforcement officers are co-operating to battle the problem. Judges are handing out stiffer sentences to carriers of dangerous knives. Merchants have been ordered to remove them from their windows and threatened with stiff prison terms for selling them to minors.

The schools help too. In an unprecedented directive, Newark School Superintendent John S. Herron instructed principals and teachers to suspend—even expel—students bringing "oversized pocketknives" to school.

"I have not had a single complaint since then," Dr. Herron told me.

Because the term "dangerous knife" is vague in New Jersey—as in most state laws—a down-to-earth woman legislator, Grace M. Freeman, expects soon to introduce a bill to clarify it. Under her proposal, registration of all knives over a certain length would be required. Switchblades would be outlawed flatly. And New Jersey's law on the sale and possession of other dangerous knives would be greatly tightened.

"Why put temptation in people's hands by making it so easy to buy a switchblade?" said legislator Freeman, a former schoolteacher.

**B**ECAUSE of the growing number of knife assaults in Washington, D. C., Congress will soon be asked by the United States Attorney's office to pass a local ordinance requiring people buying switchblades to secure permits. "We want to make it as hard to buy a switchblade as a gun," Assistant United States Attorney Wilson reveals.

What the District of Columbia and Newark are doing, other places all over America should be doing.

Why aren't they?

Simply because of public apathy.

On your behalf, I have asked the authorities what women can do now. Here are their answers:

I. Make sure that your children don't carry switchblades or other dangerous knives.

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from page 88

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### The Laughing Sprites

from page 88

...everybody that it doesn't really belong to us... But what harm would it possibly do to... to be given to some more dry... that she didn't dare let herself think too... much of that just now... Beautifully designed and chrome-plated... Try it and you'll buy it...  
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2. If your son has a pocket knife for scouting or fishing, discourage his taking it to school, the movies or other public places. Don't let him be smart-alecky about it. De- glamorize knife-carrying to him.

3. See to it that your local storekeepers don't have flagrant window displays of dangerous knives. Help prosecute dealers who sell them to minors. Through your local woman's club or PTA you can conduct educational campaigns against switchblades and award posters to co-operating merchants which say:

This Store Has Stopped Selling  
Switchblades and Other Dangerous  
Knives to Help Cut Down Juvenile  
Delinquency and Crime

4. Help your local law-enforcement agencies round up dangerous knives.

5. Work for passage of a state law which bans switchblades and controls other dangerous knives. To be effective, laws must be statewide because children can cross city limits to secure the forbidden weapons. Naturally, these laws must be strictly enforced. In one state it's against the law to carry a concealed switchblade all right, but many stores go right on selling them.

In coming days, more and more state legislatures will ponder the dangerous knife problem. They can greatly benefit from the pressure of aroused far-sighted women interested in protecting their communities.

Human nature being what it is, when a switchblade tragedy occurs too many of us deplore the incident—and then forget all about it. But as Newark Safety Director Keenan reminds us, "If we can make America safe from firecrackers, we can from knives too."

Don't lie unduly alarmed.

But don't wait, either, until a youngster—it could be yours—is murdered with a "toy" pocketknife.

[THE END]