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
DO 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]
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. He 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-throwers 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.
"What do you use them for?" salesmen were asked.

"Sharpen pencils, cut string, anything," they replied.

"Why are they better than ordinary penknives?"

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

In my home town switchblades have been advertised as "Safety Push-button Knives." Push-button, yes. But safety? Even 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 gashed his right hip.

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 a 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—younger 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

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0fficial. "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 stale
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.

BECause 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 arc 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.
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]