

Following Bindle's lead the inspector had taken the precaution of stepping aside ; but Tippitt, unconscious that the van contained anything more aggressive than carved-oak furniture, was in the direct line of exit. At the moment the doors flew open he was in the act of removing his coat and, with his arms entangled in its sleeves, sat down with a suddenness that caused his teeth to rattle and his cigarette to fall from his lower lip.

Synchronising with the opening of the doors of the pantehnicon was a short, sharp blast of a police whistle. The effect was magical. Men seemed to pour into Downing Street from everywhere : from the archway leading to the Foreign Office, up the steps from Green Park, from Whitehall and out of Numbers 110 and 111. Plain-clothes and uniformed police seemed to spring up from everywhere ; but no one took any notice of the fall of Tippitt. All eyes were fixed upon the human avalanche that was pouring from the inside of the pantehnicon. For once in its existence the Metropolitan Police Force was rendered helpless with astonishment. Women they had expected, women they were prepared for ; but the extraordinary flood of femininity that cascaded out of the van absolutely staggered them.

There were short women and tall women, stout women and thin women, young women and—well, women not so young. The one thing they had in common was lamp-black. It was smeared upon their faces, streaked upon their garments ;