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## The Punchline

by Sue Hitchcock

The appreciation of Tommy Cooper's humour was not easily acquired – at least it took me a while. At 6'4" with a pudgy face and rather gawky movements, he has to qualify as a clown, not with outrageous clothes, but dressed in a dark suit and wearing a fez, the uniform of a magician, only his hair sprouting out at the sides giving the clue. He said he once saw a bad magician and decided that was what he wanted to be. This is indeed how he presents himself.

The stage is set with tables holding his magician's paraphernalia, but he is thwarted almost immediately by distractions – sometimes stagehands remove things, sometimes people pass across the set, unaware of him and the audience. He looks powerless and worried, a person of our time. Then he tries a few magic tricks, usually unsuccessful – a rope cut in pieces does not reassemble in his fist, but then almost without his noticing, some small flower will reappear in his buttonhole, or a silk handkerchief will change colour.

Next he may do impersonations. Sometimes he uses a box of hats to make the characters for a story. He races through, giving each character maybe thirty seconds. None are believable, the hats are wrong and eventually he loses track of the story and ends defeated. One attempt at ventriloquism with a huge doll called Marmaduke Marmalade, in which he made no attempt to disguise his lip movements ended with him asking the doll, "Whose turn is it to speak?"

In his final performance the first half ended with a version of the magic trick where the magician produces large objects from his jacket like doves and bouquets. Tommy had on a large overcoat and was standing in front of the centre of the

curtains and was extracting object from inside his coat, but as the objects increased in size they had to be extracted from between his legs. After a bucket came a milk crate and finally a ladder, the helper almost emerging too at the last push.

At this point the television programme was interrupted by an advert break, but in the theatre the audience saw a young woman come to dress Tommy in a huge, red gown. Tommy spread his arms as she fastened it down to the bottom, and then he started to sag. Gradually he descended to the ground. The audience were still laughing in expectation when the paramedics arrived to take him to hospital, where he was declared dead on arrival.

What a punchline! Tommy would have loved it and surely he would have been glad to die working, at the height of his power, but for the fans it was a sad bereavement.