



## CLOWN WITH A HANGOVER

"YOU remember the time I knocked down Waterfront Nell?"

It was W. C. Fields as Cuthbert J. Twillie, phony oilman and cardsharp, talking to the barman in *My Little Chickadee*.

The barman was pretty angry. "Why, you didn't knock her down, I did," he said.

"Well," Fields said, unperturbed, "I started kicking her first."

For fans of W. C. Fields, those few lines of dialogue will bring back the flavour of one of the great clowns whose lifelong motto was "Never give a sucker an even break"; and for the fans as well as for the young who have never seen or heard Fields—and perhaps never even heard of him—ZB Sunday Showcase will present on September 8 a biography in sound of the great man. Narrated by the American radio star, the late Fred Allen, *Magnificent Rogue* will bring listeners not only the voice of Fields himself but those of some who knew him—Mack Sennett, Maurice Chevalier, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. It was Charlie who described W.C. in one of their last appearances in radio together as "a two-legged Martini." "You weren't born," he said. "You were squeezed out of a bar rag."

The Fields motto and his alcoholic reputation were no mere stage props, for

he grew up in a hard world. The eldest son of a travelling salesman who rarely sold anything, he recalled: "We were all poor, but I was poor first." At 11 he was living by his wits after running away from home when he hit his father over the head with a box. From then till he was 15 he never slept in a bed. Those were the days when he learned to cheat at cards to earn the money to live with. Often this was only a nickel for ginger ale; the rest of his meal he would lift from the free-lunch counter. The sleight of hand he developed in this way began to blossom at 14 when he saw a juggling team. Practising sometimes for 16 hours a day, he made himself one of the best jugglers ever.

Fields' addiction to alcohol also seems to have developed early. One man who worked with him when he was about 20 declares that even then he drank beer for breakfast. Late in life Fields himself reckoned he had spent at least 200,000 dollars on whisky. By that time he had graduated to Martinis, which he is said to have mixed by taking alternative swigs from bottles of gin and vermouth. His daily consumption was two quarts of gin apart from wines and whisky. Nunnally Johnson once asked him: "Bill, do you ever get the DTs?" Fields replied: "I don't know. It's hard to tell where Hollywood ends and the DTs begin."

To understand his alcoholism is one way to understand his comedy, for to him the world always had the vague menace and malevolence that it has for anyone with a hangover. His comedy is an acquired taste, its basis a low opinion of humanity. Explaining its appeal, his biographer, Robert Lewis Taylor, has remarked: "Most people harbour a secret affection for anyone with a low opinion of humanity."

Born Claude William Dukenfield, Fields retained a liking for odd names in spite of the simple one he used professionally. He wrote the scripts of many of his films under such pen names as Otis Cribblecoblis and Mahatma Kane Jeeves, and gave his characters names to match: Abigail Twirlbaffing, Miss

★ "NEVER give a sucker an even break" ★  
—W. C. Fields (in top hat) as Cuthbert J. Twillie in "My Little Chickadee"

Plupp, Filthy McNasty. His Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield*, which some consider his best performance, is probably the only one in which he kept more or less to the script—and even here he was narrowly restrained from doing his entire juggling routine. His genius for improvisation on the set could be disconcerting, and Mae West still remembers how stunned she was when in the middle of a take Fields ad libbed: "And how is my little brood mare?"

Fields was himself to the end. When his nurses dropped their voices to whispers just before he died on Christmas Day, 1946, he put his fingers to his lips and winked broadly.

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