

YOU DON'T HAVE to be Jewish to write a story about chicken soup, as Katherine Maclean with prompting from Mary Kornbluth, magnificently proves. Chicken soup has been credited by comedians and wise men alike as being the equivalent of "Jewish Penicillin"—good for anything that ails you. It is possible that with a few special ingredients and a soft incantation or two it might have even more remarkable properties.

Katherine MacLean has since 1949 been a much admired and much anthologized writer of science fiction, but her ventures into fantasy fiction have been rare. Possibly one of the reasons is that there is small market for weird fiction today or even in the last two decades. Possibly a better reason was that she did not have an authority on the potentialities of chicken soup like Mary Kornbluth to urge her on.

As might be obvious from the name, Mary Kornbluth was the wife of the late Cyril Kornbluth. She had met him through science fiction, having entered into correspondence with enthusiasts in the field (including your editor) as early as 1938. In recent times she was best known for the anthology *Science Fiction Showcase*, published by Doubleday in 1959 and published as a sort of memorial to Cyril Kornbluth who had died the previous year.

Asked how they came to dream up so deliciously ethnic a brew as *Chicken Soup*, the two authors merely smiled inscrutably and chorused: "Try it! You'll like it!"—

Chicken Soup

By KATHERINE MACLEAN and MARY KORNBLUTH

HERBIE'S LAST MORNING class ended at eleven, which left him easily time enough to take the subway and see what his grandmother was having for lunch. You might think a grown man, a student at the university, would be too busy to visit his grandmother, but Herbie was a good boy. He remembered how fondly she used to kiss him, and what wonderful things she and his mother used to cook and serve whenever they visited together.

The minute he entered her house, half past the hour, he smelled a fine rich smell of chicken soup. Taking a firm grip on the books under his arm, he followed the scent through the living room to the kitchen door.

"Grandma," he called; expecting his voice to come out louder than it did.

He could hear her humming inside. That kitchen was a mysterious place, for women only, full of secrets. His mother and grandmother had never let him in there when they cooked together. He pushed open the kitchen door anyhow, and sidled in.

His grandmother was plump and roundshouldered; she was stirring a pot and singing to herself. It was a pleasant little chant, full of repeating sounds.

Herbie came up behind her and gave her a light hug and a kiss on the ear, but she shrugged him off and continued stirring and chanting. He saw that she was stirring the soup with a long bony chicken foot. He had seen chicken feet used to flavor soup but there was something about the way his grandmother did it. Something mediaeval. It reminded him of witches and wattled huts and peasants and the knights in Chapter 3 of his history text. The witches used to make a kind of brew that would let them fly, or something, didn't they?

The idea pleased him. He perched on a tall kitchen stool to watch. She finished the monotonous little song and dropped the chicken foot in the pot.

"What are you doing, Grandma?" She smiled briefly. "I'm making chicken soup, the way my own grandmother made chicken soup. What's so special?" She came over and gave him a warm hug and a squeezing kiss on the cheek. "You're getting bigger every day, Herbie. Already last year you're the size of a man, and you keep getting bigger."

He didn't want to talk about that. "What were you singing, Grandma?"

She bridled, as if he had criticized her. "My grandmother used to sing when she made her chicken

soup, and the soup was good. People used to come for miles, when someone was sick . . .”

"May I taste, Grandma?"

With the mixture of irritation and self-satisfaction with which artists face their critics, she dipped the ladle into the soup, and held it, steaming, for him to sip.

He sipped. Delicious, and penetrating, and subtly spiced, but not quite what he expected. Nothing tastes just as it did in childhood. He remembered some more from Chapter 3, Volume II of *The Rise of Western Civilization*.

"Was it a white-feathered chicken, Grandma?" He sipped, took the ladle and drank the warm soup that remained. Buttered toast flavor? These spices were subtle.

"A white capon, yes. They are more tender. All the Delaware chickens are white. Your cousin Abner is in the chicken business in Delaware."

"Did a priest let its blood on an altar?"

"Herbie, you're sick maybe?" Her voice was a croon of concern. "It's a good koshered chicken, by a rabbi. Who knows what they do with the blood? Are you worrying it has blood in it? Don't worry, the rabbi can be trusted. Your cousin Abner—"

There was a singing in his ears, a pleasant lightness in his heart. "Grandma, it doesn't taste just right. There's something missing." He heaved *The Rise of Western Civilization* out from under his arm and opened it on his knee. "There's a recipe here ... A copperpot, a virgin white-feathered cock, killed—ah, skip that." He skipped down the line and raised his voice. "Well-water, leeks, parsley, henbane, thorn apple, green hemp (cannabis)—"

Herbie stopped talking. His grandmother was pottering about the kitchen throwing out discarded peelings and parings. Her back was stiff, to let him know she was ignoring advice and recipes from an amateur.

He cleared his throat. "Grandma, what are those long-stemmed greens you just threw out?"

She was surprised into answering. "They grow wild in the empty lot at the corner. I put their leaves in the soup, for flavor." She picked up a fallen leaf from the floor and threw it after the stems.

Herbie had seen leaves like that. And he knew what some of the wild students did with them at the university...rolled and smoked them...but always behind locked doors.

"You pick them? Don't people see you?"

She cleaned the kitchen briskly, her back looking stubborn as outraged virtue again.

He ventured farther. "The policeman at the corner, he stops the traffic for the school children. Have you talked about picking those leaves with him?"

Her back still turned stiffly, she rinsed a pot. "I don't discuss cooking with the Irish! Is that what you learn at school, Herbie?"

"It says here in the book, use henbane, and those tall greens you put into the soup already, and thorn apple."

"Yes?" She dried her hands and came over to him. "Maybe in your book they know a little. Henbane I added already. What about this thorn apple? When do you add it?"

"It doesn't say when to add it, Grandma. What is thorn apple?"

"They don't know how to write a recipe." She went over to the copper kettle and tasted thoughtfully. "Thorn apple? In the rock garden, that green prickly plant, the one your cousin Edmund put his hand on when I sent him out to get some sweet basil. I didn't know thorn apple was good for flavor."

She shrugged. "Herbie, go pick a thorn apple."

"Yes, Grandma." He was out the door to the backyard before she finished asking.

"Be careful; your cousin Edmund pricked his thumb—"

Herbie was back already, bearing a green fruitlike object covered with broad thorns. "Here it is."

Shrugging again she pared it, diced it, and dropped it into the chicken soup, singing a bit more of the doggerel chant. He could not make out the words.

"What is that you're singing, Grandma?"

"Oh." She stopped. She even laughed. "It tells the soup to get inside you and go to heart and head, muscles and toes, you know, like a good soup should."

"Let's taste it."

"Too soon, she protested, but already was reaching for the big kitchen spoons, one for her, one for Herbie.

They both sat on kitchen stools, their feet on the rungs, watching each other's expression and sipping the hot steaming broth delicately from the edge of the spoons, so as not to burn the lips.

"Herbie, what was that recipe? Is it kosher?"

"No, Grandma," he answered dreamily, as if in childhood. "Christian then?"

"No, Grandma"

"What then? Let me look in your book, please, Herbie."

He shook his head. "It will be hard to find the page again, Grandma!" He rose. "Let's taste the soup some more. I don't taste anything different."

"I told you we had to wait until the thorn apple cooked."

With pleasure they returned to the pot and the delicately changed aroma of the soup. Like epicures they inhaled the rich steam and dipped their spoons into the boiling broth. With their eyes meeting in the pleasure of experimentation, they each sipped the new flavor.

Whoosh.

The world spun to a blur and stopped, steady again, but had drastically changed.

They found themselves transported. They stood on the side of a mountain with their ladles still in their hands. It must have been the other side of the world, for it was nighttime there and the wind was whistling around them.

A firelit ceremony was in progress some distance up the hill, with dancing and leaping and prancing.

Herbie had a chance for only a second of delighted gazing before his grandmother covered his eyes with her hands.

"A nudist colony! Oy vey, don't look Herbie, don't peek!"

Instantly they found themselves back in the kitchen.

"Grandma, did you see that giant goat? And the little goats? And girls..."

She compressed her lips. "I wouldn't remember."

He reached for the soup with his spoon. "Let's try it again. Let's go back and watch. It is research, scientific research."

She took the spoon and put it in the sink. "Research! Looking at those goyim, dancing and hopping? Where are their mothers, I'd like to know?"

"But Grandma," Herbie protested, his eyes looking into memory, "how can you tell, when they aren't wearing any—"

"I can tell." Her lips shut tightly against further comment. She picked up two potholder cloths and approached the stove.

"What are you doing?" He was dismayed.

"What does it look like?" With a sigh and a grunt she carried the large pot out the back door and poured its contents into a metal bucket. "A spoiled batch you throw away. It's good for the neighbor's dog. Flat soup shouldn't go to waste. It's a skinny dog. The neighbor, him!"

Herbie leaned toward her coaxingly. "Let's try the recipe again, Grandma. This time no garlic. The books say garlic frightens away the spirits."

"Next time, more garlic, and no thorn apple at all," the plump little woman said firmly. "I should know better than to let a man help with cooking! From a history book, even." She looked at him seriously, wrinkling her forehead. "You're getting to be a big boy, Herbie. Your mother and I will find a marriage broker and find for you a nice Jewish girl. You'll like her, you'll see."

"Oh, Grandma, you're so old-fashioned!" He picked up his history book and tucked it under his arm. "I have to get back to class. It takes a half hour on the subway." He kissed her and turned to leave.

Claws clacked on the stairs to the back porch. The neighbor's dog appeared, tail wagging. At first he

hesitated over the hot soup. The little old woman, tired from vain labor, sat on the kitchen stool and watched with an impartial, almost scientific expression.

Tantalized by the rich aroma, the dog lapped eagerly at the soup. Suddenly he howled, and vanished without having moved a step. Not even a bit of his tail was left.

Herbie's grandmother sighed. "I hope he's happy with those goats."