

the true story of  
Olde Old One



Eldritch Confections

as set down by Holden Finch





**M**any are the times I have been asked to set down the true story behind the Olde Old One Eldritch Confections Company, both by those who have come to love the preternatural tastiness of my treats and those with less savory intent.

I have fended off the spying of the merely greedy and avaricious who envy my decades of success, and resisted more forceful efforts by those who are agents of wholly unwholesome forces that do not show their frightful faces near the habitations of man.

During my lonely decades of confectionary greatness, I have kept my vigil against thieves and lurkers despite opprobrium from lesser men who would wrest my secrets from me through the court of public opinion, and the legal assays of gray bureaucrats who would feed the leeches of mediocrity with my recipes that they might fatten themselves even as my own fortune dwindled to nothing.

All these men ... the greedy, the lazy, the dishonest ... look at the Olde Old One Eldritch Confections Company factory out in the wilds of New England, on the outskirts of some nameless town, and see only a factory. They send their spies to study our bakeries and pry into the contents of the supply trucks that enter, or the delivery trucks that leave, and they walk away insisting we harbor some unpatented industrial process. If I could die knowing they still wallowed in ignorance, I might die smiling.

But as each dawn breaks more dim than the last and as the collection of little aches and pains and diminishments of reason and memory gather themselves to mount one last assault on my stooped frame, I must set down how I came to create the Olde Old One Eldritch Confections Company, not as a parting gift to the parasites and thieves who've tried to wrest my secrets from me all these years,

but as a warning to man that a failed recreation of my success could spell an age of darkness and blood unknown since the daemon princes of g'Ryklhe built their castles of bone and skin.

"Ah," I hear you saying, "but if these secrets are so terrible, then how are we to hope that upon learning them some mad conjurer or fickle alchemist might not use them to bring doom upon our world?"

By learning my secrets, younger generations will find the sword and shield with which they can defend the very sun and stars under which our kind lives out its days, even as those lights grow dim in my own eyes.

As the marketing department at the Olde Old One Eldritch Confections Company has maintained all these decades:

"Our Wicked Treats Make Nameless Things Sweet."



I grew up in the gray, sooty precincts of a Pennsylvania mill town. My father had gone off on a speculative venture in the Arizona Territory the year after my birth and never returned. My only memory of him is a tattered telegraph my mother kept under her pillow for years until a visiting uncle -- angry old Oram Finch -- ripped it to bits before her eyes and sprinkled the yellowed bits into the fireplace, imploring her to leave our shabby home where she had hidden for eleven years.

Something in the air of that town disagreed with me, and combined with my mother's protective ministrations worked to sap me of much of the vitality other youth enjoyed. Consequently I spent much of my time at the library of a local university, enchanted by tome after dusty tome of lore from the Great Ages before man as we know him established dominion over lesser orders ... from the time when man himself was a lesser order.

Not long after the visit from my angry uncle, my mother's psychic condition slipped from its fragile but capable state to one of total despond. When the local schoolmaster detected that the lunch pail I brought to school was packed with my piteous attempts to provide my own meals, he implored a local doctor to follow me home where my mother's near catatonia was discovered. She was committed to a sanitarium in the Pocono mountains to the east, and for years after the publication of Mr. H.P. Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness" I would laugh mirthlessly and mutter "The Poconos?" whenever that fraudulent work was mentioned.

Having realized they had orphaned me, the local authorities set about to find a relative who would take me in. A survey of my mother's effects eventually unearthed a return address that led to one Mr. Oram Finch ... the very same Uncle Oram who had torn my mother's fragile sanity to bits and sprinkled it into the fire. I was informed that Uncle Oram had begun his journey to our town to dispose of mother's effects and to take custody of me, and I sank into a depression so dark and miserable that I was put in the temporary care of a local doctor ... a quack who fed me nothing but a foul gruel of herbs and bitter roots until I wasted to near nothing and was found stumbling down the dark back streets of town, feverishly muttering of the bile of ancient horrors.

Not long after, Uncle Oram arrived and seemingly set out to deepen the dread I already felt toward him by indecorously dumping my mother's property -- clothing, keepsakes, furniture and all -- into a bonfire in our back yard.

I remember him standing there in the dwindling afternoon light of that autumn day, hard eyes 'neath his startlingly bushy and wild eyebrows flickering with the small inferno he had created. He turned to me briefly and said "Now poor Hiram can know some rest," Hiram being my own father's name. For a moment I imagined his angry and harsh mien had softened into something like pity or sorrow, but no sooner had I registered the change than his expression turned stern once more and he growled "But you ... you'll need to be cured of your effete town habits and rid of the addled passivity your accursed mother bred into you."

At that I drew myself up to respond, but before I could speak the first word of angry remonstrance he grabbed me by my ear and cuffed me ... the first of several such blows I would endure at the hands of the fierce old man until I was liberated from his care.



**T**wo days after he had fed my mother's memory into the fire we boarded a train for New England, where Uncle Oram owned a farm and lived a life of reclusive bachelorhood. Being a penurious man, he refused to pay for a berth in the Pullman car and we spent three days sitting and sleeping upright in the hard seats among aging pensioners, destitute wanderers and rumpled travelers who moved about the train with the easy familiarity a round-faced accountant might move about his own sitting parlor after a day at his ledgers.

During our three-day-long trek north, Uncle Oram spoke few words, and those usually muttered at night as he slept in his hard seat. I could make out little of his speech, but my years in the musty precincts of the library had provided enough education in old tongues that I realized Uncle Oram's years of seclusion in his rural hideaway had not been given solely to agrarian husbandry.

On the second night, Uncle Oram stirred briefly from one of his nocturnal soliloquies and fixed his fierce eyes on me. I tried to snap my eyes shut in an imitation of sleep, but he grabbed my ear with a hoary old hand and pulled my face close to his, hissing a stream of ancient syllables I understood well enough to cause me to blanch and flinch away from his burning gaze. Then just as suddenly he released me and turned back toward the window. When his sleep-talk resumed, his tone was sorrowful and his words a jumble of English sprinkled with the crystalline tone poetry of the fabled Faerie Dominion.



**O**ur journey ended early the next day, with the train rolling to a stop at a decrepit station where no one besides Uncle Oram and I disembarked. Where other train stations bore the name of their towns, this one had none, and Uncle Oram never mentioned it. The air was cooler, as befitted our more northern location, and the leaves on the trees bore the vivid paint of a recent hard turn in the climate.

As had been his way since he came to take custody of me, Uncle Oram spoke little and offered few instructions. He merely set off down a dusty street, and I

stumbled along after him, carrying and sometimes dragging my battered little suitcase ... a flowered thing that had survived Uncle Oram's bonfire and was now stuffed with my threadbare clothes.

Had anyone been out I might have been embarrassed to be seen so publicly discomfited, but I saw nobody on the streets or sidewalks of the town. I knew the town wasn't abandoned, for I could hear the occasional door or window slam shut as we passed. It did not surprise me, because Uncle Oram was exceedingly queer and folks in such remote hamlets are known to be superstitious. If Uncle Oram was perceived to be some hermit conjurer, their sort would want little enough to do with him.

I thought at first that we were surely walking to a parked conveyance of some sort, and imagined with no small displeasure a bumpy and loud ride over potholed roads in some dilapidated truck or even a wagon. But my fantasies, however unpleasant, gave way to even less pleasant reality as I struggled to keep up and the small storefronts and homes of the little town gave way to fields and a country lane: Uncle Oram had brought no truck to town and intended to walk all the way back to his rural sanctuary.

How long we walked, I do not know. We started before the sun was at its zenith and we continued until it was low on the horizon. For the whole of our walk to his home, Uncle Oram said nothing at all. Periodically I would throw down my suitcase and announce that I could not continue. He would stop and look back at me, then shrug and continue to march down the road. I would gather my suitcase and stumble after him, imploring him to stop long enough for me to tend to my blistered feet, but he said nothing and offered no comfort. At last, Uncle Oram turned down an overgrown lane that seemingly disappeared into the woods.



As grueling as the long march from town had been, that lane tormented me more. A dread quiet replaced the night noises of crickets and frogs, and no breeze stirred. I imagined myself suffocating in the gloom of those woods as the path twisted along beneath looming, twisted trees. I imagined things waiting in the woods just out of sight, and when I turned my face away from the trees I imagined I saw scores of faces just out of direct sight.

At last, though, we passed out of the woods, and our journey ended a few hundred yards more at a dilapidated wooden gate that stood sentry for Uncle Oram's demesne.

My first glimpse of his farmstead caused my heart to sink. An old and sagging barn loomed behind a circle of buildings, including a decaying old springhouse, an abandoned chicken coop and the farmhouse itself, which wore a tattered coat of whitewash and exuded a cold sense of abandonment. A small toolshed leaned to one side, as if it would collapse with a light touch. As I took all this in, movement caught my eye and I turned to look between the springhouse and abandoned chicken coop. From the shadows between the two buildings emerged the largest mastiff I had ever seen, and it began to walk toward us emitting a low growl I imagined I could feel in the very air, like the thrumming of some hideous, cyclopean harp. I fancied that its eyes glowed in the fading sun, and I could make out missing patches of fur and notches in its ears. Uncle Oram saw it, too, and barked an angry command in some tongue I had read but never heard. The beast bristled at his command but settled onto its haunches and balefully watched us progress to the sagging porch of the house.

Uncle Oram introduced me to my quarters with no more ceremony than he had escorted me from town. He merely lit an oil lantern and led me up creaking stairs into the chill gloom of the upper floor, pointing at a warped door situated in its frame as if it had once been violently torn off its hinges then inexpertly remounted. I walked into my new quarters eager to put down my bag and beheld a bare room with nothing but dingy, tattered wallpaper that spoke of a gayer owner in some happier time, a plain bed with a sagging and stained mattress, and a small bedside table occupied by an oil lamp.

I turned to Uncle Oram to ask after a blanket and linen, but he had already disappeared from the doorway. As I considered following after him to ask for some morsel of food, I heard a door close with a sharp report then heard a bolt being drawn. I sat for a while on the edge of my creaking, sagging bed looking out the dusty window into the farmyard. As my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I could see that the hideous mastiff I had encountered earlier was staring back at me. How long it sat there, I do not know, because exhaustion came over me and I collapsed on my miserable bed, pausing from my descent into sleep only long enough to spill open my suitcase and pull some clothes over me like an exotic Asian steppe rat might gather bits of bark and torn scraps of cloth to make a little nest.

I dreamed all night of walking an endless, dusty road while gibbering, nameless things crowded around me just out of sight.



I was awake with the cold, autumnal dawn. At some point in the night Uncle Oram must have come to look in on me, because where I had fallen asleep under a pile of my own clothes, those clothes were now heaped on the floor, replaced by a rough, woolen blanket of a shade that suggested an early life spent in the filth and mud of the Kaiser's war. A tin basin was perched atop a chair that had also found its way into the room sometime in the night, and it was filled with water.

Sitting next to the chair on the floor was a plate. On the plate were stacked small candies of various shades: brown and orange and even some black confection wrapped in wax paper. The plate also held a note:

"On business for the day. Will ret. this evening. Wash your face, change your clothes and eat. Under no circumstances should you go downstairs. -O"

I paused briefly to wonder how much business Uncle Oram could conduct if he had to walk all the way to that ramshackle town and back before evening, but pointless speculation gave way to a realization that I was famished. I took the plate back to my bed, spoke a brief word of blessing over it and picked a candy from the plate.

Lest one think that the reduced circumstances of my childhood caused me to be raised in total ignorance of the sorts of dainties the more prosperous classes enjoy, I hasten to point out that I was no stranger to candies and sweets. My fellows at the school I had attended frequently arrived at the schoolyard with lunch pails containing all manner of little desserts and candies. Because my bookish and scholarly nature was known to many, it wasn't uncommon for the children of prosperous bankers and clerks to pay me a nickel or two to ghostwrite their

essays on history or other subjects they found tedious. And sometimes, if one of those apple-cheeked little plagiarists had spent a nickel meant for me on a toy or a lurid magazine filled with the scribblings of hack fantasists, I would take some sweet from his lunch pail in lieu of his squandered money.

Suffice to say, then, that even if I had been raised in poverty by a shattered woman teetering on the brink of insanity, I knew many kinds of candy, and so it is not due to any ignorance on my part that as I put my fingers to the first morsel I was wholly unprepared for its strange characteristics and promptly dropped it back to the plate, pulling my hand back as if I had been stung. For the candy was warm in a way that belied the crisp autumnal cold that pervaded my bare room. And more hideous than its inexplicable warmth was the sense that it moved ever so slightly, as if detecting my intention to pop it in my mouth, and was feebly struggling against that end.

On the plate, though, the pale, orange confection just sat there, looking not unlike a mundane marshmallow of the sort I had earned from many a ghost-written history essay. My stomach growled and I decided that any warmth or motion I had detected was the result of exhaustion and hunger playing tricks with my imagination and senses. I seized the bit of candy with more authority and quickly brought it to my mouth, telling myself that any sensation of living warmth or struggle was foolish hallucination.

In any case, once I bit through it all such hallucinations fled and I was left with an overwhelming sense of warm contentment. The texture of the confection was, indeed, like that of a marshmallow, and its sweetness was punctuated with a sort of spicy flavor that reminded me of the one and only Christmas dinner I had spent in the company of anyone besides my careworn mother and our customary

cabbage soup with its bit of bacon fat bobbing around. We had spent that Christmas in the company of the local parson, who had taken my mother and I into his house as an act of Christian charity. His wife prepared all manner of delicacies including a gelatinous but wholly delicious pumpkin pie. As I sat chewing the marshmallow, I was transported back to that dinner, its pleasant memory dimmed only slightly by an awareness, having revisited it, that my mother had, indeed, been on the edge of madness for the years we shared a roof, and that the parson and his wife spoke to her with the same slow and careful tones one might converse with the very simple or the dangerously violent.

That memory gave way to my immediate realization that I was eating a marshmallow that tasted unlike any marshmallow I had ever eaten. I reached for another, a pink one, and such was my eagerness to sample it in the wake of the revelatory savor of its platefellow that I flinched only briefly when it, too, seemed to feebly squirm and emit a ghastly living warmth. Like the one before it, the squirming ended abruptly when I bit the candy in half. The flavor this time was of peppermint. A bit more banal and commonplace, perhaps, compared to the spicy hint of pumpkin pie the orange marshmallow had evinced, but the flavor was such that I ignored my momentary disdain and set about popping the candies on the plate into my mouth as quickly as possible, ignoring each time the disquieting warmth and brief, twitching resistance of each morsel under my teeth.

I finished the plate quickly and such was the pleasure I took in it that I was up from my bed and across the room to the door so I could run downstairs and seek more when I remembered Uncle Oram's injunction against leaving the upper floor. My enthusiasm diminished, and I settled back on to the bed, head propped up on an elbow, the better to look out the window and down into the farmyard, where the mastiff sat staring up at me. After a while I forgot the creature and

began to daydream of Uncle Oram's candies and meditate on how strange it was that a man who had created such unfathomably tasty treats lived in utter seclusion, sharing his confections with nobody but the miserable orphan nephew he had taken in with no more enthusiasm than one might adopt a blind and decrepit possum.

Another, darker thought pressed itself on me as I gazed out the window, but every time I turned my mind's eye toward it, it would fade out of reach. I recall now that the only part of that thought I could hold onto for more than a moment was a half-remembered bit of lore from some crumbling book that recounted the fall of Y'gn -- candy capital of the ancient world -- at the hands of some nameless horror.

For some hours I worried at that thought as one might poke one's tongue at a bit of meat stuck between the teeth.



**A**fter some time, my stomach growled as the memory of my candy feast dimmed. I began to grow restive and thought of ignoring Uncle Oram's order to remain upstairs. Finally, some time after the sun had reached its zenith and the only living thing I had seen all day had been the vigilant mastiff, I decided Uncle Oram suffered from an uncertainty about how to handle a curious young man and had no doubt told me to remain upstairs only out of fear that I would meddle in some adult contrivance of his.

I reasoned to myself that Uncle Oram would be none the wiser if I let myself out into the lower floor long enough to explore its precincts and perhaps find a bit more of that luscious candy, provided I disturbed nothing and left no trace of my passing. Having so convinced myself, I eased open the door, peered up and down the gloomy hallway, and crept toward the stairs.

In the morning light, it became apparent to me that the ramshackle condition the old farm house conveyed from the outside must have been some attempt by Uncle Oram to render his habitat unremarkable to whatever passer by who might somehow brave the menacing, overgrown lane and find his way back to the farm. I reasoned thus because the inside of the house was well kept and somewhat orderly. Where the house's facade was peeling and unkempt, the walls inside were covered with clean if faded wallpaper. There was little dust to be seen on the banister as I made my way down the stairs, and they emitted hardly a creak or groan. Once I arrived at the bottom of the stairs, I saw that the little entrance parlor was tidy, with old but well-tended furniture, including a circle of three sitting chairs around a small table that held a dainty china tea set. I suppressed a small laugh when I thought of craggy, fierce Uncle Oram sitting down to tea with white-gloved ladies out on a country lark to visit the old bachelor.

My attention turned, then, to double doors that led, I assumed, to some sort of dining room and possibly the kitchen beyond. I crossed the entry in front of the stairs and approached the doors. They were locked, which seemed strange to me, but I could also see the metal of the lock was untarnished and that the wood around it bore fresh scars. Uncle Oram had, evidently, been preparing for my visit.

At first I thought to take the lock as a sign that I needed to return to my room and heed Uncle Oram's directions, but I noticed that the doors sat unevenly and I realized that Uncle Oram had not closed them tightly enough to allow the lock to catch. Seeing that an imagined obstacle was no more, my resolve to open the doors doubled.

I put my hand on them to push them open when I stopped, thinking better of my expedition. Uncle Oram had shown me some little hospitality, it was true, but I thought of my time with him as he was disposing of my mother's effects, his fierce and unyielding behavior as we journeyed north, and his disdain for my footsore stumblings on the long march from town to his home. I had confused his moment of kindness with some change in the old man, I thought, and I told myself it might be best to proceed upstairs and put my brief foray out of my mind.

But as suddenly as that thought came, it left. I was hungry, and I wanted more of those candies ... especially the marshmallows. So I cautiously pushed the doors open, stuck my head between them and let out an involuntary gasp.

I had reasoned that Uncle Oram's sitting parlor was the gentile truth behind the ramshackle masquerade of the farm's sagging, neglected out-buildings. But what I saw behind those doors convinced me that the sitting parlor was, itself, a masquerade, designed to put visitors at ease if the run-down exteriors had put them in doubt of Uncle Oram's cleanliness and good character.

I had opened the doors expecting to see a tidy dining room, perhaps with a well-polished and gleaming table and lace-top sideboard. Instead, I saw what looked to be the laboratory of a disturbed alchemist. There was a dining table, but it was given over to stacks of ancient texts, dusty jars filled with murky, unwholesome-



looking fluids in which I could make out shapes that could have been those of amphibians -- or deformed, foetal humans -- a number of copper bowls filled with assorted powders, a careless scattering of butcher's knives and, perhaps most startling amidst detritus that could have fallen out of a passage way to some medieval past, a well-worn copy of Mrs. Fannie Farmer's Boston Cooking-School Cook Book.

It was at that moment I first realized Uncle Oram's candies were, indeed, supernaturally tasty. Clearly he had taken modern food science of the kind systematized and quantified by cooking scholars such as Mrs. Farmer and wed it with much older, darker knowledge. The memory of those squirming marshmallows leapt back to my mind and I felt a moment of dizziness and dread. Whatever I had eaten, it was no mere combination of sugars and other mundane ingredients ... it was imbued with some sort of eldritch force.

No sooner had my moment of unease passed, though, my mind seized on something else altogether, appropriate perhaps to someone who had grown up in poverty and spent his days thinking of the many ways just a few pennies more could lessen his discomforts: Uncle Oram's candies would be as shockingly wondrous to the rest of mankind as they were to me. Given Uncle Oram's secrets, I could free myself of my reduced circumstances and perhaps even liberate my mother from whatever dreary dungeon she had been confined to by those Vienna-educated quacks with their talk of "histrionics" and their foolish pursuit of psychic diseases.

I stirred from my reverie and thought to look beyond the dining room, back into the kitchen. If Uncle Oram had converted his dining room into a laboratory in which he fused modern culinary technique with ancient wisdom, surely the

kitchen was where that fusion bore its tasty fruits. I skirted the table, taking care not to disturb a single thing on it, and made my way to the kitchen.

There I gasped yet again, because as easy as it was to grasp what I had beheld in the dining room, it was impossible to understand what I now saw. Instead of the usual kitchen with sink and stove, I saw a gloomy room plunged into murk by thick curtains hastily nailed over the windows, dominated at its far end by some sort of cast iron cauldron. If there had been a sink or stove or any other domestic convenience, it had long since been ripped out. There were, in fact, no cooking or baking utensils anywhere to be seen; just a lone axe propped against the wall next to the cauldron. I could see two hoses protruding from the outside wall and dropping to the floor. Something about them caused me to look more closely. Straining my eyes in the gloom of the darkened kitchen, I approached the hoses, wanting to make out more detail but filled with an inexplicable dread.

The closer I got to the hoses, the more about them I could perceive. They dropped to the floor, yes, but rather than ending in a tangle, they stretched along the floor and back to the cauldron. Approaching them closer yet, I made out something of their texture. I had assumed them to be made of canvas or similar, but they looked slick and shiny with condensation, causing me to revise my appraisal and wonder if they weren't, instead, rubber. Closer yet, I noticed that they pulsed ever so slightly. With each pulse I could hear the liquid sounds of fluids dropping into the cauldron. The kitchen was redolent of a sweet, cloying scent.

Just as I thought to follow the hoses to the cauldron, I heard a barked command outside ... the same guttural syllables I had heard the night before when Uncle Oram cowed the mastiff. He had returned. I was suspended in indecision for the merest fraction of a second before my legs seemingly took action of their own

accord to save themselves even if the dithering pate that rode atop them couldn't reason out a self-preserving command. I dashed out of the kitchen, around the dining table, and through the doors of the dining room. I bounded up the stairs and turned into my room just as I heard the key turn in the front door's lock. I eased my door shut and arranged myself on the bed in a way that I imagined conveyed a day of tedious confinement.

I listened as Oram climbed the stairs, shuddering at the thought that he might have somehow detected my trespasses and might burst through the door, fierce eyes blazing, ready to chastise me. And the door did, indeed, open. Oram did, indeed, stride into the room. But instead of angry recriminations he had only an armload of books which he dumped on the bed next to me with little ceremony and this comment: "Your schoolmaster said you have a knack for history and languages. You'll be wanting to read these if you're to be of any use. I'll be back with some oil for that lamp. Tomorrow you start earning your keep."

And thus began my apprenticeship to Uncle Oram, which was to last almost a year from that day I scampered up the stairs like a frightened hare.



“**A**pprenticeship" is a strange name for what ensued, I suppose, for Uncle Oram never told me once why I did any thing he commanded. Rather, he would issue some perfunctory order then retire into his dining room. One day might find me out in the fields looking for a specific herb or flower, to be harvested just so. Another day might be spent with mortar and pestle grinding curious little seeds or nuggets of some black and unwholesome smelling resin.

Some days I was sent to walk back into town to gather what provisions I could carry in a rusting child's wagon. The store where I made my purchases was tended by a man who would speak no words except to ask of me what I required. I would present a list written out in Uncle Oram's precise hand, the man would take it with a grunt, and he'd fill my wagon with no further comment. Nobody else in the town would speak to me, either, some of the more unfriendly townsfolk crossing the street to avoid me.

Every single day had one thing in common: A morning repast of assorted candies, and an evening entree of the same. Uncle Oram never provided anything else to eat, and never on any trip to town was I ordered to bring back anything besides assorted ingredients no cook, no matter how learned, could have fashioned into anything other than candy. Often, my shopping list included nothing but large sacks of sugar. In any case, if the things I drug back from town were used for anything besides candies, I never tasted them. Candy was the only fare Oram offered.

Some days I read up in my room under careful orders to read some books only by day. When Uncle Oram peered in one afternoon, he saw I was sounding out some strange syllables, scarcely moving my lips, and he moved across the room with frightening speed and cuffed me hard, ordering me to never, ever move my lips while reading again.

The books Oram left with me, like many others that would follow over the years, were of a sort I knew only as faded rumor from my delvings into ancient and weird lore, but had never beheld with my own eyes. They spoke of the evil, brobdingnagian creatures who held sway over our planet in the aeons before

man ever rose up on two legs, and of ancient kingdoms that rose and fell leaving no trace before mighty Ur was even a collection of mud huts on the unspoiled banks of the Tigris ... forgotten antiquities to people who would, themselves, be lost to history before the first pharaoh drew a squalling breath.

And they spoke of candies.



**C**andy, I learned, caused the very first human kingdom -- a small province somewhere in the blasted Arabian desert and scarcely worthy of the designation "kingdom" -- to fall into the sand in a few terrifying moments, for the king had imagined himself to be learned in ancient lore and swore to his court that he had wrestled with the great Old Ones themselves in the night. Making mock of his "fallen" foes, he ordered the court confectioner to fashion delicate balls of sugar and molasses, calling them "Dagon's Eyes." He did not know one of his court alchemists was in communion with lesser daemonic minions of an ancient evil, nor that the same alchemist spoke of the king's jape to those minions, who whispered in the ear of a leviathan of the sand that swam up from the desert depths and engulfed the kingdom in its hideous maw, avenging the slight against his oceanic cousin.

I read also of the fantastical candyworks of Y'gn, a city that passed out of human knowledge when yetis still chased our man-ape ancestors across the Himalayas. Y'gn's confectionary factory was universally confounding to scholars modern and ancient, producing candies through a process that was easily observed from beginning to end with the exception of one mysterious structure through which

conveyors of sugars and exotic spices passed. Whatever process was applied to them within, they emerged as a mysterious material -- all referred to it as the ur-candy -- about which no scholars agreed in description except to note that in the hands of Y'gn's master confectioners, it could be shaped into sweets of transcendent delight. Some scholars hypothesized that Y'gn's secret was, no doubt, some cunning mechanical contrivance powered by primitive mastery of electrical current and possessed of the ability to measure ingredients with an adding machine's precision.

Y'gn was often near the fore of my thoughts because it shone out as a scholarly challenge to me. So many accounts, so many myths and wild tales surrounding it, and they all could agree on only two things: Y'gn's confectioners harbored a wondrous secret, and the city was destroyed by some extreme calamity that left no survivors ... not even creeping rodents.

How many books did I read? I lost count, and Uncle Oram never explained why he would call on me to recite some detail or another, so it seemed as if my mind was full to sloshing over with disjunct facts and ancient trivia. But I gradually became a master of confectionary lore, learning recipes and methods forgotten among men. I read six separate scrolls on the Abyssal Marzipan of t'Rly'gh, and nine more on the 99 Fingerless Bakers who tended sleeping Shtoth with cakes made from bone flour and the virginal lard of heathen princesses. In my dreams, I stood over the kitchens of Druzh-An, powerless to stop the Mad Pastryman Abul Ruh from his ill-starred and fatal pursuit of Niqon's Tenth Nougat. And I awoke screaming some nights, as if I too were drowning in the Nameless Caramel that engulfed proud Ngish.

As my knowledge grew it became apparent to me that Oram was also vexed by dead Y'gn, and the drift of his questions began to take on more meaningful form. I guessed that Oram had somehow recreated Y'gn's confectionary device and was seeking some way to increase its output. Perhaps he was eager to offer his candies to the world and reap a fortune.

Now, because I was given to reading ancient lore anyhow I was not at all discomfited by my tasks. Perhaps because I was comfortable with my new role as Uncle Oram's personal dilettante and offered little resistance to his instructions, he began to soften a little toward me. My reading sessions were, at first, to be conducted only in my shabby little room, but over time Uncle Oram began to drop off the books and mutter something about reading in the front room if I wished. Once I left a volume in that carefully maintained sitting room upon retiring, and Uncle Oram cursed and hit me, confining me to my room for a week.

In general, Uncle Oram was more likely to ignore me than cuff me, though. He wasn't particularly cruel, but the most words he ever spoke to me were to gather what information I had culled from the books he kept stacked in my room. His instructions were usually terse, and he expressed approval with a grunt. When my handiwork was poor or my recitations lacking, he'd snort and shake his head as if mystified that someone so simple could manage to so much as draw two breaths correctly.

Did I hate Uncle Oram? With my mother locked away in a sanitarium, I had no one else in the entire world, and few prospects. Uncle Oram, it seemed, knew some secrets worth having, so I bore his gruff behavior as a schoolboy might bear the stern schoolmaster guarding the diplomas. When I did come to possess his

secrets, any preference I might have expressed for his fate would have been other than what befell him.



**T**here were a few other conditions peculiar to my apprenticeship with Uncle Oram. He was adamant, for instance, about three things:

I was never to venture past the door to the dining room, though he merely called it "that door" and I was careful to make no mention of it as anything besides, either. The instruction was needless, because every time I passed it I glanced at it surreptitiously to see if Uncle Oram had, perhaps, failed to secure it after that first morning spent in his house, but he did not repeat that mistake.

The sagging, dilapidated barn in the back was similarly forbidden. There was no evidence of any farm creature living within it, and it looked menacingly decrepit. I had no wish to brave it in its tenuously stable state. But one thing about it aroused some small curiosity. Between it and the back side of the farm house were well-worn ruts, as if a sledge had been pulled between house and barn many times. And leading up to the house was a crude dirt grade that ended just under a curious patchwork of boards. Perhaps Uncle Oram had abandoned some project to build on to his house, or perhaps he had drug tools back and forth from barn to house. I could not tell, and it was a minor enough mystery compared to the alchemical lair he had made of his dining room.

Third, I was to stay out of the sagging springhouse outside. Uncle Oram gave no more reason than "You've not read enough yet," and it took only a moment to



consider the places my reading had taken me while in Uncle Oram's custody to decide I wanted no part of the springhouse. That instruction was also needless, though ... if the springhouse door had not been locked by an imposing lock, the mastiff seemed to take especial care to stay between me and it. It bristled if I so much as glanced at the building, which was wholly unremarkable, with some exceptions.

Though Uncle Oram's farm was overgrown with weeds, nothing would grow near the springhouse. For several yards all around it, the ground yielded nothing but barren dirt and rock. No creeper scaled its walls, no moss dotted its roof, no single blade of grass grew near it.

Second, a small mound ran out from under the two sagging steps that led up to the springhouse door and snaked its way over to the side of the house, where I could see in a window the same blankets I had seen nailed over the kitchen windows during my own and only foray into that room. It was a low mound, scarcely more than a few inches high, but nothing grew over it, either, and in the winter no snow settled on it without melting.

Third, the windows of the springhouse were boarded shut from the inside, and so it was that I could see the glass panes and observe drops of water, as if the springhouse was exceptionally humid indoors.

Now, I have read about all manner of natural springs, famed for their high concentrations of sulphur and other minerals. The parson in my home town had once regaled me with tales of hoodoo-men in India who made it a point to sit in such springs for days at a time in the belief the minerals held in the steaming waters would permeate their flesh and, with proper meditations and diet, restore

them to youthful vigor and make them resistant to the many diseases that plague the backwards corners of the world. The parson dismissed such talk as heathen nonsense and backwards paganism, but his tales had caused me to investigate on my own. If the parson had known about the Hot Springs of Dead Glell, he might have laughed less heartily. But then, if the parson had been the sort to study the ancient past he would have been careful to draw the shades and light a second candle before mocking the old beliefs.

So it seemed to me that the springhouse might be situated over some natural thermal spring, which would have explained the humidity within, the refusal of plants to grow over sulfur-infused soil, and the evidence of plumbing leading into the farmhouse. For Uncle Oram may well have thought it an interesting experiment to tap the spring and direct its restorative waters into his own house. But the springhouse didn't have the stink one associates with sulfurous waters.

The hoses in the kitchen, the mound leading from the springhouse to the house, and the curious refusal of anything to grow near the springhouse suggested another possibility: It was said that some electrical processes could disrupt the growth of living things. If Uncle Oram had recreated the confectionary machine of Y'gn, perhaps the scholars were right, and perhaps that same device was kept in the springhouse.

My interest in the springhouse only deepened one summer night, and the curiosity it kindled lit the lamp that led me to freedom from Uncle Oram's Spartan tutelage ... and confectionary greatness.



I spent the winter doing more reading and more chores. With the snow piled high, Uncle Oram seldom left his property, and there was little to do outdoors. So my world remained confined to my room, and Uncle Oram's fastidiously maintained sitting parlor.

Somehow I never grew tired of the candies, though. Indeed, eating them seemed to gradually impregnate me with a sort of far sight, for just a bite or two of marshmallow would sometimes cause me to sink into a reverie in which the things I read of in Uncle Oram's ancient books leapt to vivid life in my mind's eye. One vision in particular returned over and over.

It was said that before Y'gn was destroyed by whatever calamity befell it, two other mysteries besides the inner workings of the mysterious box amidst its miraculous confectionary works vexed all who visited the fabled city.

First, none knew what powered the great candy-making process. If the ingredients and working confectioners were in plain sight, the mechanisms that caused the great conveyors to move along were not. Modern scholars had many theories, all at odds with the contemporaneous accounts, which were full of prosaic speculation about subterranean mastodon farms with wheels turned by dozens of the immense beasts.

Second, such was Y'gn's pride in its candy-making that the contrivance that conveyed ingredients along the path to final product was available for all to behold. Visiting confectioners assiduously studied the process hoping to glean some hint of how to duplicate Y'gn's success. Owing to this intense scrutiny, the volume of ingredients passing into the works was well documented, and the

volume of resulting candy was equally well known. Despite the impressive volumes moved by the Y'gnians, it seemed the city exported only a fraction of its likely output. Applying all the known candy-making sciences of the time, none could figure out how it was that Y'gn's annual sweets production was as low as it was. Where was the candy going that wasn't sent by caravan or sold by Y'gn's own merchants? In some heathen lands the priestly orders could be accused of skimming a goodly share, but Y'gn's own clerics were known to consider the candy an abomination on some theological or metaphysical grounds, and refused to touch even a morsel of it.



**A**s winter gave way to spring, Uncle Oram seemed to warm to me ever so slightly. I had become better at discerning the thrust of his questions and adjusting my reading accordingly, which pleased him, and I had become familiar with my other chores such that mistakes I made while about them were few.

We began to take our evening candies together in the front room, with Uncle Oram conversing with me about my reading in a more collegial manner. He was clearly pleased with himself and it occurred to me that my scholarship must have helped him solve some problem that had vexed him.

As spring led to summer, though, Uncle Oram became withdrawn, again. The turn of his questions shifted from both its collegial queries and its previous fixation on simple facts, and moved toward questions of my own character, and curious excursions into the fate of Y'gn. None had the answers to what happened

to that city. Only that one day it ceased to be, and that all within its walls perished. But Uncle Oram turned the subject over and over.

It occurred to me that Uncle Oram's replication of the Y'gnian candy works was causing him some anxiety, though he was guarded in his questions and even more guarded in his occasional diversions from his largely Socratic approach to our conversations.

And after a while, the spring thaw reversed itself.

One night I retired to my room after our evening meal and I saw a bolt on my door. I turned to ask him what the purpose of that bolt was, but he had yet to come up the stairs, so I went to my bed deciding that whatever warmth had grown between Uncle Oram and I, it must have been tenuous.

I awoke the next morning to the sound of the bolt on the door being drawn open. Uncle Oram had locked me in at some point in the night, and he engaged in no ceremony upon unlocking it. For several weeks following, I'd sometimes start awake not long after falling asleep to the sound of my door being bolted shut, and I frequently awoke to the sound of the bolt being drawn open.

Oram's mood changed once again during that time, along with the first meaningful change in the routine we had established the previous fall.

One day Oram didn't unbolt my door and I heard no sound of him moving around in the house all day. No breakfast was left for me. At dusk, I heard Oram walk up the stairs. He unlocked my door, pushed it open and tossed a tin of salted meats into the room. I opened my mouth to speak, but his eyes locked on mine

and I sensed a simmering fury in them. I looked down at the floor and heard him shut and bolt my door.

The thought of eating the meat made my stomach turn, and I chose instead to go to bed, hungry and miserable but unsure I could force myself to eat anything besides Uncle Oram's candies. I had known nothing else for many months. The next morning he unbolted my door and opened it, another tin in hand, but he saw the untouched tin from the night before, shrugged, and shut the door once more.

I did, finally, choke down the tinned meat, but it caused my gorge to rise and I slept fitfully.

That routine continued for a week, with Oram opening my door and tossing in a can. Each day he seemed to be more agitated. The sound of his movement through the house belied an almost frantic mood. One afternoon he abruptly opened my door and asked a few questions of me, but when I made the mistake of anticipating his next question, he shot me a queer, guarded look and shut the door without another word. It seemed to me that something had gone very wrong with the confectionary device in the springhouse, and Oram was teetering between confessing its existence to me or keeping it a secret to protect whatever mercantile intentions he had for it.

After a week, Uncle Oram finally let me return to some of my chores, but he was still agitated and still refused to let me leave the house. As if he felt some guilt for my confinement, he allowed me to eat my tinned meats in the front room with him. His manner was anxious and hasty.

Our meal finished, he sent me to my room but he remained seated, staring out the window. In my room, I laid awake in the gloom, turning over Oram's most recent questions. It seemed to me that he must have somehow damaged his machine while trying to perfect it.

I heard the front door open, then Uncle Oram's usual stern words for the mastiff outside, and I realized that such was his anxiety that he had gone on to complete whatever mysterious nocturnal task had caused him to confine me to my room each night without remembering to bolt me in.

My curiosity was already piqued, and it was with little conscious thought that I eased open my door, slipped down the stairs and peered through a window in the front room just in time to see Oram walking from the dilapidated toolshed, a large sack over his shoulder I recognized as one of the sacks of sugar I had brought back on a provisioning trip. He was walking toward the springhouse. He muttered a few words at the mastiff and it fell in at his side.

I opened the front door enough to look around it. Oram and his canine familiar had already walked around the side of the house. I crept onto the porch and eased down the steps, crouched low. I moved to the edge of the porch and looked around the corner. Oram had just opened the springhouse door and was turning to reshoulder his bag. The mastiff went in before him. Luck was with me and he didn't see me as he took up his bag. He walked through the door and pulled it only lightly shut behind him.

I had never before felt the same sense of confused emotion I felt at that very moment. I knew it was madness to pursue Uncle Oram any further, and yet I could no more resist the compulsion to do so than I could will myself to grow a

sixth finger. With only a moment's tormented hesitation, I ghosted across the grass and over the dead earth that surrounded the springhouse and crept up the stairs.

Just as I put my hand on the door to push it open and look around, I heard two voices. One clearly belonged to Uncle Oram, and the words he spoke filled me with dread, for they were harsh exhortations from the black language of an evil race:

"G'rlm! G'rlm! Yig hath! Yig hath g'hrm! G'rlm hath yig! Ng z'rel k'hez!"

The other voice was high-pitched and squealing ... like a pig being slaughtered ... but with a curious purpose that suggested words spat out in some bestial tongue in the spaces between awful torments. It was not a voice that belonged to any creature of this age.

Choking down my terror, I pushed the door open and beheld a ghastly tableau of the sort my readings had caused to haunt my dreams.

Oram stood stripped to the waist, a long and wicked dagger held high over his head. He was covered in some milky material that glistened on his naked torso and caused his hair to matte in twisted clumps. He stood carefully on the edge of a line I knew could only be fashioned of salt, preparing himself to lunge across and strike the thing on the other side.

And what a monstrosity!



Ready to receive Uncle Oram's blade was a mass of flesh piled over seven feet high, spanning the width of the room, and so white that it appeared to be some sort of living, writhing alabaster. I could see rents in its surface where Uncle Oram's dagger had torn it, and they oozed a thick, pale material that coagulated like sap even as it seeped out of the wounds. The mouth making those hideous shrieks belonged to a tiny head riding atop the mound of corpulent flesh ... all over the body, hundreds of tiny hands batted at the air, curling and uncurling into fists, clawing at nothing.

And beneath the mass of flesh? A pair of rippling, serpentine forms with gaping, slobbering maws that slipped around in the ghastly white gore making slurping, appalling noises as they gobbled at the muck. They had no eyes, and their mouths writhed with masses of long cilia. I followed their serpentine length with my eyes and saw that they seemingly disappeared into the wall, where they were held with chains and hooks. Even as they strained to suck up the shrieking mass's drippings, they emitted their own tormented cries as each lunge caused the chains and hooks to dig deeper. My stomach lurched and I grew dizzy as I realized the skin encasing those eyeless horrors was the same material that covered what I had imagined to be mere rubber hoses in Uncle Oram's kitchen.

I must have gasped, because the mastiff turned around and the fur on its back bristled. It peeled back its lips revealing a mouth full of yellowed and broken fangs. Its motion distracted Oram, who paused in mid-strike and turned to look at me. His face was a frenzied mask, his mouth pulled into an angry snarl as he spat out black syllables of binding. In a split second he seemed to recognize me and come briefly to his senses, then he saw my expression change from one of shock to alarmed horror, for in breaking his concentration I had momentarily freed the thing he was tormenting from whatever psychical bonds Uncle Oram

had placed upon it. Both eyeless, slobbering serpents lashed out at his legs, and the huge white mass let out a triumphant shriek, engulfing Oram even as he turned. The mastiff lunged at the mass, but the serpentine things struck it and it died with a yelp.

The last I saw of Oram, he was being sucked into the mass, crying out at first in a vain attempt to reestablish his dominion over the monstrosity, then mewling piteously as its hellish digestive processes consumed him. The last words I heard from him were directed at me, called out just before his face was drawn into the white folds of the horrific mass:

"The sleeper in the barn must eat!"

Then he was gone and I was alone in the springhouse with the flailing, blind serpent-things and the gibbering white mass.

And the mass itself seemed unaware of the murder it had done at all, the tiny hands grasping and writhing, the sounds of almost human agony still escaping from its tiny slit of a mouth in ragged pants. As if with a mind of its own, a corner of the mass rose up from the floor, like the edge of a carpet being lifted up, and engulfed the mastiff's body, drawing it back into the grotesque bulk, where it disappeared.

I stood rooted to the spot, unable to run, paralyzed beyond all hope. The white mound stopped its feasting. And as if possessed of some preternatural sense, the two eyeless serpent-things wallowing in the pale gore snapped erect and pivoted their obscene maws toward me. I stood a half-second more, and the things threw themselves at me, cilia writhing in anticipation of the taste of my flesh. Only the

chains and hooks held the things back, but barely, for I saw the walls sag under their straining weight. And the pale thing that had eaten Uncle Oram suddenly seemed to be aware of me ... and furious. It gathered itself up, towering up to the point of crowding against the ceiling of the springhouse, seemingly spreading out to fill any empty crevice. I knew it would somehow catapult its grotesque mass at me.

So much reading had I done, and so especially familiar was I with the lore of fallen Y'gn, that the warding words Uncle Oram had invoked as I crept up on his monstrous harvesting sprang to my own lips as readily as the alphabet to a schoolboy.

"G'rlm! G'rlm," I cried, "yig hath! Yig hath g'hrm! G'rlm hath yig! Ng z'rel k'hez!"

The thing seemed to cringe at those words, drawing itself far back against the wall behind it.

I advanced, repeating the dread words over and over until the thing shrank to half its size and emitted awful, piteous groans, shuddering with each syllable. The serpent things curled around it and became still. I backed away, uncertain of how long the warding would last ... and then I fled the springhouse and ran back to the house. All of Oram's questions and all my own reading of Y'gn's mysterious demise crystallized. Something in the barn needed to be fed lest the horror that consumed Y'gn rise again.

I ran through the front door and turned toward the double doors of the dining room. They, unlike my own room that night, remained locked. At first I thought to find a key somewhere in Oram's own quarters, but even as I imagined running

up the stairs to search, the floorboards began to vibrate beneath my feet and a low, horrible sound resonated through the air, causing the windows to shake. Sobbing with terror, ears aching from that sound, I threw myself against the door over and over. At last, the lock yielded and I was through. I ran through the dining room door to the kitchen. All was as I remembered it from my first visit, with but two exceptions.

First, the hoses that led from the outside wall to the cauldron at the far end were writhing, just as the serpentine things in the springhouse had. I choked back my disgust and ran past them to the cauldron, which was full to overflowing with a white substance I knew to be none other than the fabled ur-candy of Y'gn. Even as I considered it, a horrific shriek rang out from the springhouse, causing the hoses ... no ... the serpent-things ... to quiver and thrash all the more, and the contents of the cauldron to roil about, looking like huge maggots writhing under a thin layer of marshmallow topping.

And standing by the cauldron I understood at last the purpose of the strange dirt grade that led up to the back side of the house, for Oram had put the cauldron on crude skids he'd fashioned from rusted pieces of some dismantled farm implement. What I'd thought to be an aborted attempt to build on to the house was nothing more than an improvised door, held in place with just a few boards and nails. Oram had planned much in advance, for an axe rested in the corner next to the flimsy facade, and strong ropes were coiled around the base of the cauldron.

I hacked at the door and it fell away. Looking out from the kitchen toward the barn, I could see the old building shaking, dust rising from its old rafters and wheezing out into the air, its windvane swaying crazily. I coiled the ropes around my waist and heaved against the cauldron. At first it resisted my efforts, but soon

the rusty skids began to grate against the kitchen floor and the roiling pot of ur-candy began to slide down the dirt grade. Redoubling my efforts, I dragged it toward the barn.

As I approached the door, another hideous wail emanated from the springhouse, and the deep, throbbing sound began to change, taking on a sonorous, woeful sound that faded away briefly before redoubling as a furious roar. At that roar, the wailing from the springhouse became more frantic.

I made it to the barn doors as a loud crack sounded through the air. A rain of splintered, rotted wood fell around me, and I looked up in time to see an enormous white tentacle begin to probe the open air over the barn's ruined roof. I pushed open the doors to see a shaft of sunlight stream through the shattered roof and illuminate the barn's inner precincts.

Where one might have expected a wooden floor with scattered straw and other detritus, there was instead a huge pit all ringed with stone. Carved into the stone were ancient runes and hieroglyphics. Writhing in the midst of that pit were dozens more white tentacles that became still in the moment before the thing in the pit roared again.

I threw myself against my improvised harness one last time, dragging the cauldron the last few feet. How I avoided the tentacles as they whipped around in the barn looking for something to grab and crush, I do not know. How I disentangled myself from the ropes I do not remember. How I found the strength to push the cauldron into the pit remains an inexplicable feat I attribute to hysteric energy. I only remember falling away from the pit and scrambling toward the door, and watching the tentacles retreat into that black hole. I fancied

that I could hear the cauldron crushed somewhere in the echoing depths. Then the angry roars from the pit subsided.

The piteous shrieks from the springhouse did not end for some hours later, but as the thing in the barn failed to respond they faded in urgency, and all was quiet by dawn. I sat on the dirt grade in front of the broken kitchen wall and stared at the barn, unwilling to take my eyes from it, but having no plan should the evil thing inside awaken once more.

It did not, and after many hours of sitting I arose and retreated inside the house to glean what I could from the collected scholarship in Oram's dining room.

Were the two things ancient companions from our planet's dim past? A mother eternally separated from her demonic offspring? Travelers from a distant star who found themselves bound and enslaved by the mad genius confectioners of Y'gn? Stranded remnants from some hell-spawned assault on our world? I did not know, and still do not, for the thing in the springhouse speaks no tongue I recognize, and the thing in the barn has never been allowed to reawaken. It is regularly fed some not insubstantial portion of the annual output of the Olde Old One Eldritch Confection Company's single factory in the wilds of New England, on the outskirts of a nameless town built on the aeons of rock and dirt that cover ancient Y'gn.