

# The Madness of Franz Agapa

By Nick Hayden

Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Franz Agapa is mad. He wasn't always that way. Once, he was a respected member of Burmashan society. Look at him now—unkempt hair, worn shoes, sun-darkened face. In Burmasha, he never wore the same shirt twice. By the smell of it, he's been wearing his current one for weeks.

“Get up,” he urges his son. “I will not suffer laziness. We have a mountain to climb.”

Pierre stands, though he does not want to. He looks at the mountain. It is not a new sight. He has seen it for days as they traveled slowly to its foot. Mount Aginsar. It is said that the gods dwell at its summit. Pierre cannot see its summit. It is hidden in clouds.

“I am tired, Father.”

“It is good for you to be tired. You will feel the ache in your legs tomorrow. It is a sign that you are alive.”

“I feel the ache now, Father.”

“That is good as well. Keep quiet for a time, will you, Pierre? We will rest in awhile.”

The slope they climb is covered with prickly grass that makes Pierre's legs itch. He is a boy of twelve, with pale skin that burns red in places from the sun. He wears a smart outfit, loose-fitting trousers that show his calves, and a pressed shirt of green and yellow with a stiff collar. A cap that fits snugly over his large head does nothing to keep the sun from his eyes; it does make his hair damp with sweat. What Franz Agapa retains of his previous fortune goes into Pierre's wardrobe. Pierre's wardrobe goes into Pierre's backpack. Pierre hates his backpack.

They ascend in silence. I must admit, it is a quaint picture. Draw back a bit. There, on the lower foothills are husband and wife, out for a day's hike. Their son tags along, acting the grownup with his stolid determination. It *is* quaint. But you don't know Franz Agapa like I do.

That night brings rain. It is only a drizzle, and Franz laughs at his son's displeasure. “You were hot, Pierre. Look, the gods have seen that you are hot.”

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“Yes, Father.”

Pierre helps his father pitch the tent. He tries his best to anticipate what his father wants, but he is not yet good at setting up the tent. Franz scolds him with a rough laugh. “Marie, look at our dear child! Is he not a clumsy one?” Marie looks at her husband but only meets his eyes with a blank stare. “Return to your cooking, Marie. I was only joking.”

The tent is managed somehow, as is supper. Marie serves her son from the tin dishes they have brought with them. She smiles at him, places a hand on his shoulder. He stares at her in the same way she has looked at her husband. “What do you want, Mother?”

“Nothing, Pierre. There is more if you are still hungry.”

I contend that Marie Agapa is not completely mad. I grant that she is somewhat mad. It is inevitable that she should be. She was bred a Burmashan woman, designed for homely duties and maternal dreams. If a Burmashan woman does not love her husband, she will still obey him. To obey is to love, they say. She knows, I believe, that her husband is mad, that he dreams dreams unfit for him. It makes her quieter, more aged, but does not alter her duties.

In the tent that night, as the rain, now fierce, lashes against its sides, she combs the boy’s hair. He sits quietly. I look at his face and cannot decide if he is unhappy. But what twelve-year-old admits if he longs for his mother’s embrace? Franz watches them absently. It is obvious his thoughts are upon the mountain.

“There must be some hidden passage,” he says, looking for their interested response.

“Yes, there must be,” says his wife.

“Why must there be?” asks Pierre.

“No one can ascend the mountain by hand and foot. You can see the sheer cliffs. With the proper tools, we might make it halfway up.”

“Maybe there is no way up, Father.”

The mad glint enters Franz’s eyes. “I will bring my case before the gods. I will not listen to their priests, the greedy thieves. The gods must be approachable. They interfere in the lives of men. I will interfere in the lives of gods.”

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Pierre does not answer his father. He waits a sufficient time, then yawns. I do not believe he is tired, but he curls in his blanket and closes his eyes.

“Franz...” His wife cuddles close to him in the small tent.

His face is still set. “We will storm the heavens.” It softens a bit. “We will crawl in maybe. You think I am crazy.”

“I know that I love you and that you must do this.”

He has heard this before. He shakes his head. He, too, wraps himself in a blanket. Father and son sleep, or seem to, as Marie sits awake, listening to the wind.

“Get up.” Franz shakes his son awake. “The sun has beaten us. Already he races toward night. Get up, it is time to move.”

Pierre sits, crawls out of the tent. After a cold breakfast, they set out. The world glistens, a newborn thing just out of the womb. Pierre looks about as his father treks ahead. A smile touches his face. It is a feminine smile, full of worry, a mirror of his mother’s.

“Pierre, get moving. We’ve got to reach the top if you ever want to come down.”

The day struggles by. Shifting, crumbling stones at their hands and feet hinder them. Patches of grass soothe their feet. Trees, becoming more stunted as they climb, give some brief shade, too quickly passed. By noon Pierre’s clothes are shades darker from sweat. His father’s heaving breath travels through his flared nostrils. A smile of gleeful purpose is on his face. Marie, attired in a frayed and fraying dress, is too warm. She slumps to the ground.

“I am fine.” She waves off her son. Franz kneels beside her. He talks softly to her, and they share a long dialogue that Pierre tries to hear but cannot.

“It will be cooler in a day or two,” Franz explains to his son after he pulls away from his wife. “It will be easier then. We shall stop for lunch now.”

The second half of the day passes much as the first. Sound, perhaps, is the most pervasive element of the journey: the steady rhythm of feet, the calls and flights of birds, the frightened movement of animals, the wind, and each of these wrapped in the encompassing silence, where there is no human voice or clank of human invention. Each traveler travels alone, until the

evening. Then they share a common bed.

And yet, beside the silence is an interior experience, both growing more difficult and more facile. As muscles ache and minutes lengthen, the next step becomes the entire moment. *How many more?*, they might ask behind blank faces. But once the pattern is established, to stop requires will, and so always, if these three are similar to others I have observed, the tension remains. To continue is effort; to cease is effort; what other factor shall determine the choice?

“Pierre.”

He looks up from the corner of the tent. “Yes, Father?”

“What is the matter with you? You have not said a word all evening.”

“I am tired, Father.”

“Come. Have you not seen wonderful things today? How many other children can say they have seen Mount Aginsar the way you have seen it? You are very special, Pierre. Smile a bit.”

Pierre smiles. It looks not happy, but sorrowful, heavy with anxieties.

“Tell me, son, what will we say to the gods when we find them?”

“We will tell them our story.”

“You must be more specific than that. You are talking to the shapers of the world. Imagine I’m a god. What would you tell me?”

“We were rich once, but we were beset by disasters. We were robbed. Our house caught fire. Our family name was shamed by the slander of wicked men. An ill eye was cast upon us from the heavens. We have come to demand justice. Where is the one who cursed us? We demand that he be tried.”

All this he says without emotion. But his father, intent upon the words, nods at each statement. “Yes, yes. And they shall accept our demand, because we have made the journey none have made. We shall be justified. Does it sound wonderful to you, Marie?”

“Yes, Franz, it does. Perhaps we should let Pierre sleep now. He has walked far today.”

“Yes, yes. I will sleep soon. I must look at the shadow of the mountain. I will return shortly.”

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Franz leaves the tent. “You have done a good job, Pierre,” his mother says as she tucks him in. She kisses him on the forehead. For a time, she strokes his hair, and he lies awake, silent. His eyes fill with water.

“What is the matter?”

“They will kill him,” Pierre whispers fearfully. “You used to tell me the story of Siloam. He wanted wisdom, but when he climbed the mountain to get it, it rose higher and higher. The gods walked among us before that. That’s what the story says. But after he walked where he should not have, they left us. They separated from us because we made them angry. He was told not to climb the mountain. They won’t let us defile their land, Mother. They will kill father.”

“Quiet, Pierre.” She holds him, but her voice is fearful. “I do not want you to say such things.”

“Yes, Mother.”

When Franz reenters the tent, they are in the same position. It is a gentle, touching scene, and he may find it as such. I do not know.

Days pass like fingerprints, each unique, but each the same to one who does not study whorls and lines. It is cool now where they travel and growing colder. Pierre wears a fur-lined jacket he has only before tried on in a shop. The ground has fallen into old age, the grass of its head only remaining in patches, its texture mottled, wrinkled, and hard. This night they sleep huddled together, but still they are not warm, though they are tired. Snow drifts down on the tent, the first they have seen. Franz did not expect snow for several days yet, but here it is. He does not fake sleep as do his son and wife, who squeeze their eyes tight as if willing themselves into slumber. His eyes are wide. I can only assume he is altering his plans.

Hours pass. In this time, Pierre squints into the darkness of his father’s back. His eyes flutter open. “Father?”

“Go to sleep, Pierre.”

“I think they are telling us to go away.”

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“It’ll warm in the morning. Now go to sleep. You need your rest.”

The day does warm. Franz laughs heartily at the smallest thing as noon draws near. They eat crumbs under a playful sky. The sun peeks from the clouds before again hiding. The peak is no closer—it is a fixed point—and the clouds about it do not move.

“It will be strange to walk on a floor such as that, yes, Pierre?” Franz indicates the clouds with gleaming eyes. “The finest cushions of Burmasha could not rival the comfort of such a floor. And if clouds are for our feet, what shall be used for our seats and heads, hmm?” He laughs wildly.

Marie’s dim eyes study the mountain before them. It is a different view than from the bottom, where the harsh, individual difficulties of the climb are swallowed in the great, picturesque grandeur. “The slopes look steep, Franz.”

“They are.”

When Marie speaks again, it is with a fear of stepping out of place. “We have done fine so far, Franz, but we have never climbed a mountain. How will we ascend as high as those clouds? I have never heard of anyone doing it.”

“There will be difficulties. Do you expect to talk with gods without suffering? If you doubt me, leave! I will not have you with me. Take the boy, too. He hates me. I know you do, boy. I recognize the rebellion in your face. You spoil him, Marie. Look how sullen he is! Look, he is not a man, but a girl.”

Pierre scrubs at his tears. He turns away. He does not know how to respond to his father. What little is left to eat of lunch goes uneaten. The sun sets, the temperature drops, and again they sleep.

In snow they reach the slope they must climb. They have already scrambled over rocks the size of men, livestock, and houses, as if they were traversing a strange, fleshless world. Somewhere in this mountain range live the Ronkars; human legends say they were born of

rock, though no Ronkar story agrees.

They stand as they eat hard bread, gripping it tightly in mittened hands. They have eaten much of their food. Franz paces restlessly. The bread in his hand his wife has forced upon him, but he has not the presence of mind to eat. He examines the rock face before them; he removes rope from his pack and runs it through his fingers; he stands and stares; he paces again.

“We will climb this way.” He indicates a path with his hand. “Pierre, you are the lightest. Take this rope and hook it there, on the rock.”

“Yes, Father.”

Pierre stands before the wall he must climb and looks up. Rocks slick with ice and snow are strewn on the upward path. He peers back at his father. Franz is silent, neither angry nor worried. He wears a calm face as if all that is to happen has already been completed and will not go wrong.

Pierre starts to climb, but slips. “Take off your mittens,” his father tells him. “Your fingers are more agile.”

Pierre obeys and begins again. The desolate cold of the rock seeps into his hands. He fumbles with his holds. His fingers cannot bend properly, but he is too far along to stop. His legs kick wildly to propel him up. His breath comes in quick, panicked gasps. Desperately, he looks down. His mother’s face is covered with her hands, but his father is motioning him onward. Pierre clings to the rock precariously, not moving. He feels, I think, that any movement will be a wrong one. He curls one hand into a ball to warm the fingers, then cautiously switches hands. With a final effort he pushes up, but his foot slips, his hands cannot hold him, and he falls. His head bounces against the rock.

When he can speak through the tears and pain, he apologizes to his father.

“It is fine, my son. It is fine. We will try again tomorrow.”

They ascend the face the next day. Why relate the scene again when it is much the same, except that Pierre does not fall? His mother is tied to the rope and heaved up, and she grits

teeth against the rope's grip, but she refuses to climb any other way.

For a time, they proceed again on foot. The sun visits, changing the snow to ice and water, so that each step must be well placed or it will slide. Franz leads them on a great circuit of the mountain; given enough days they would revolve around it, passing from the side that faces the Western Alliance, to the side that faces the nation of Derhalia, and back again. But only a few days into the circuit, Marie falls ill.

Franz sets up the tent and bundles her inside, but he orders Pierre to search. "This is one of their tricks, Pierre. We must be close. They are frightened of us. They know that we will succeed, and that when we do, we will demand justice for their actions. How fine that day will be, when mortals convict the gods! There will be no difference between them and us. We will storm the heavens and subject them to the pains, the loss, the senseless tragedy of our world. We will take by force what they have withheld from us, and we will return to them what they have given us. Look about. The secret entrance must be near. Search hard. We know that two of them roam the world still. There will be a door in the mountain that leads to their abode. Find it, Pierre. If you love your mother, find it."

Pierre does not find the entrance the first day, and when he returns his father hits him once before remembering his mother. He speaks harshly with Pierre, warning him to give his mother no trouble. They sleep together that night, Franz and Pierre warming Marie's cold body.

The second day Pierre travels farther, with more energy. He did not sleep well, listening to his mother's breathing and sometimes hearing words from her lips. He searches crevices, uses rocks to break ice sheets, peers intently until his eyes are blinded from sifting white from white. He returns hungry and frozen to the tent after dark, finding his way from the solitary lamp lit there. His father lectures him outside, away from his mother.

"Maybe we should go, Father," Pierre says. All day he has thought, and these words give utterance to some of his ponderings.

"Have they talked to you?" his father asks angrily. He is a black shape in the black night.

"No, Father. But for mother's sake...."

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“Your mother supports me, Pierre. She wants the gods brought to justice as much as I do.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Tomorrow, we will both search. Your mother will be better soon. Tomorrow, at the first light, we search.”

The next morning Franz forces Marie to drink a little, kisses her, and leaves her alone in the tent. Pierre hesitates in leaving, watching his motionless mother from the entrance to the tent. But his father points him in the direction he desires him to go. Pierre obeys. The two head separate ways.

The day is colder than any before due to the strong wind. Pierre shields his face by burying it in his coat, squinting his eyes against the shards of snow flying against him. He stumbles and falls, drags himself to his unsteady feet. If the door is white or gray, he has no hope of finding it.

He falls again, his foot stuck in a crevice in the ground. Looking, Pierre follows the crevice, seeing that it grows wider a little farther on. He peers into the darkness there. He thinks he sees a strange light. Perhaps it is only light reflected off snow, but he descends carefully. The squeeze is tight, so finding grips is not difficult.

A low passage runs along the bottom of the crevice, which Pierre follows. His head raises from the collar of his coat. It is warmer here, if only because there is no wind. When the light from the crack above disappears, he can still see by a dim light that grows brighter as he walks. For nearly a half hour he walks, drawn always on by the light, his head craned forward.

The passage suddenly widens. Pierre stops.

I am not sure I can describe what he sees. He sees a door, but not at first, though the door is many stories tall and wide. But before the door is a creature of light and hard edges. It stands nearly as tall as the door. The brilliance of its presence shimmers like a sun-flashed ocean. I cannot recognize arms or legs. It is almost like a suit of armor, a collection of metal slabs welded together, a spirit of fire, hammers, and anvils, barely contained in its own body. Pierre stands aghast, unable to move. Something within the creature swivels. One cannot see it move,

but it twists about the air and appears closer to the boy, as if it were always in both places, and now chooses to reveal its second self. The refraction through its single red eye spins about, now landing in red sheets upon Pierre.

He runs. His scream, high-pitched, cannot be ridiculed, for it holds the fraying edge of terror. The long passage does not end soon enough; the dreary gray of day is too high above; he reaches the upper edge of the crevice. The cold bite of snow on his face calms him some.

“I found nothing, Father.”

“Did you look carefully? It may appear as something else. It may look like a cliff wall or a pile of snow.”

Pierre nods his head, his eyes lowered. “I am sorry, Father.”

“We must find it, Pierre. Tomorrow. We will find it then.”

“But ... Mother....”

“She will die if we do not find our way up. You know why we must find it. There, with the gods, all our answers lie. There is nothing under the sun that pleases me. They must vindicate me or all is lost. You understand this, right, my boy?”

I can tell by the way his lips begin to move that he means to say “Yes, Father,” but he does not. He shuts his eyes against some emotion.

“What is it, Pierre? Do you understand why I must do this?”

Pierre shakes his head. He is trembling. “Father, there is a gulf between us and the gods. Since that day Siloam disobeyed.... There is fire between us and them, father.”

The mad glint reawakens. “You have seen it.”

“I have found nothing.” But Pierre speaks it as a terrible whisper, and his father knows. Franz grabs him roughly at the shoulders. “Where is it? Show me. Show me where it is!”

“We must go away,” Pierre says between the fear and deep sucking breaths. “We must run. We must go away.”

Franz slaps him. “Show me where the door is, or I will drag you all about this mountain looking for it.”

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Pierre nods, struggles to his feet. He does not hesitate. He is the good Burmashan child of a good Burmashan wife.

At the crevice he pleads again with his father, but Franz does not listen as he hurries into its darkness. Pierre watches him fearfully. With a sudden fervor, he runs from the crevice as quickly as he can over the snow and ice. He enters the tent.

“Mother, we have to leave. I will make a sled for you and take you down.”

She is feverish, fitfully asleep, and does not answer. Pierre sets about the packing. His manner is frantic; he moves from one thing to another, moving, rearranging, but accomplishing little. In some time he ties ropes to the whole of the tent and, standing outside, pulls it downhill. It moves slowly, awkwardly. At times it slides fast in front of him and his desperate strength keeps it from skidding down the slope. I want to laugh—if you could see the thing as clearly as I!—but I observe the emotions on young Pierre’s face and my laughter turns to pity.

At the cliff Pierre first climbed they wait for three days. On the third day Marie is recovered. She listens to Pierre’s story, which he tells with tears.

“We will wait another day,” his mother says, holding him. By her face, she wishes to weep but will not in the presence of her child. “You have been brave, son. We will wait another day for Father. If he does not come, we will descend and find a village and wait there. It may take a long time to converse with the gods. I do not know.”

Franz does not return to them the next day. They descend the mountain, thinner than they were, their food gone. And now, in the village Grekim, situated in the rocky roots of Mount Aginsar, they wait for Franz to return.

I have watched many men in my day, and though I have not yet given up the optimism of my youth, for careful observation reveals unexpected miracles and joys, I fear that Pierre and Marie will wait a long time.

(END)