

## Blood Caste

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*Musi River, Hyderabad*

*22 June 1895*

When Soob first saw the body, he thought it was a dog. In the sooty light of dusk, from under the city bastions, looking across toward the bank of the British Residency, he'd glimpsed something caught on the rock weir across the Musi River.

He had been out searching for a rare purple frog in the mudflat between the Laik ud-Dowlah and Afzul bridges, one of his constables having seen it there the previous evening—a mauve water balloon with small arms and legs. It had drawn the naturalist in Soob to the riverside; finding the frog would make up for a dismal week at work. But now, he found himself staring at a trapped dog. Or was it a child?

He plunged in. The water came up to his knees, soaking the top of his boots.

'Oi, what's wrong?' someone yelled in Deccani.

Strong unexpected currents gripped Soob's ankles, but he pushed on, feet dragging through the silken sludge of the riverbed. The streamers of algae and ribbon weed snapped, releasing the object. He dived to grab it before it shot over the

sheets of water and crashed down the waterfall. To his surprise, coir scraped his palms.

'It's only a gunny bag,' Soob yelled above the crack and boom of the water, to a stocky man in a loin cloth splashing up towards him.

Then something soft and clammy slapped his wrist. A hand jutting from the sack's mouth.

The rope tie slithered into the foaming waters as Soob hauled the sack back over the ledge and wedged it against the rock with his hip. The top gaped, and inside, a head tipped oddly to one side in the low light.

'Hai Ram! Is he dead, Chief Inspector?'

The answer was disturbingly obvious. A deep gash dug across the throat, a cut all the way to the bone.