

THE
OSIRIS CURSE



THE
OSIRIS CURSE

A TWEED & NIGHTINGALE ADVENTURE

PAUL CRILLEY



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2013 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

The Osiris Curse. Copyright © 2013 Paul Crilley. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or conveyed via the Internet or a website without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Cover illustration © Cliff Nielsen
Cover design by Grace M. Conti-Zilsberger

Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228-2119
VOICE: 716-691-0133
FAX: 716-691-0137
WWW.PYRSECOM

17 16 15 14 13 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Crilley, Paul, 1975-

The Osiris curse / by Paul Crilley.

pages cm. — (A Tweed & Nightingale adventure)

ISBN 978-1-61614-857-7 (hardback)

ISBN 978-1-61614-858-4 (ebook)

[1. Science fiction. 2. Secret societies—Fiction. 3. Mystery and detective stories. 4. Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. 5. London (England)—History—19th century—Fiction. 6. Great Britain—History—Victoria, 1837-1901—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.C869276Os 2013

[Fic]—dc23

2013022384

Printed in the United States of America

*For Caroline, Bella, and Caeleb,
my amazingly cool family.
I love you all.
You guys keep life interesting.*

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Lou Anders for editorial support, Phil Athans for grammatical support, and everyone else at Pyr for general support.

And thanks to all the bloggers and booksellers who spread the word about the first Tweed and Nightingale adventure. You guys rock.

Chapter one

death stalks the streets of London.

The winter wind, sensing its presence and feeling some distant, ancient kinship, soars above the frozen city, tossing snowflakes through the oil-black sky as it searches for its location.

The wind drops lower, gusting through the frosty streets. It skims along the pollution-scummed waters of the Thames, reaching beneath London Bridge to blacken the toes of the homeless huddled together in a pathetic attempt to escape its touch.

It flies over the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, then along the Strand, where automatons with the souls of humans go about the work of their masters. It flicks the snow around, sending it in confused, whirling gusts as it searches for the death it can taste in the very air.

There. The wind pauses, a lull in the freezing January night.
Then it drops.



An odd pair walk calmly through the streets. They are dressed in strange fashions, the man in a dark purple suit with a mustard yellow shirt, a white handkerchief poking out of his breast pocket. He carries a cane, which he swings out and around with every step. He is wearing a fedora hat pulled low over his face.

And his face . . .

Cold as the breath of winter herself, all angles and cruel bones, grey eyes so pale as to be almost white. It is only when he turns to

The Osiris Curse

check on his companion that any flicker of emotion is seen, a fire kindled behind the eyes, a fierce familial love.

His companion is a woman, although her like has rarely been seen in London. No hint of subservience. No inkling of what men would call the weakness of the fairer sex. If anything, the hard lines of her face are even crueler than her brother's. She moves slowly, her eyes, so brown as to be almost black, scouring all with their gaze.

She is also wearing a suit, and it is for this reason that she attracts so many hostile stares, stares that nervously flick away when she turns her dead eyes upon them. Her suit is a deep, dark crimson, the color of dried blood. She does not wear a hat. Her blond-white hair is scraped back from her head and tied with a piece of leather.

The two move slowly along the Strand. The theaters are finishing up, the rich and the privileged huddled beneath fur coats and gentlemen's jackets while they wait for the automata to bring the hansom cabs along the slush-covered cobbles.

They watch these crowds as they walk, staring at them with an intensity that few could miss. It is as if they are studying them, the people of London nothing but specimens in a laboratory.

The two are passing a dark alley when three men step out of the shadows to confront them. One has a pistol, and the other two raise rusty knives. The men are wearing tattered clothes, their faces smeared with dirt.

The wind swirls around the tableau, ruffling the greasy hair of the assailants, throwing snow up around their leaky, hob-nailed boots.

"Give. Come on. Everythin' in yer pockets," says the man with the pistol.

The man in the purple suit raises a delicate eyebrow "Don't be absurd."

The three muggers look uneasily at each other. This isn't how it is supposed to go. The mark should hand over everything, usually begging for his life as he did so. He wasn't supposed to say *no*.

The man licks his cracked lips and swings the gun to point at the woman. "Do it. Or the moll gets it in the head."

The man in the purple suit shakes his head sadly, making a tutting noise. "Silly man," he says. He turns to the woman. "Sister?"

"I'll handle it," says the woman. And she licks her lips and smiles, showing odd, almost translucent teeth.

The attackers wonder if they have perhaps bitten off more than they can chew. They raise their weapons all the same, but before they can do anything more the woman is moving, a blur of teeth and nails. She smacks the gun out of the way, driving her fingers into the man's throat. He coughs, gagging. Blood wells from his mouth as he drops to his knees. The woman whirls, her leg coming up. It connects with the second man's head. There is a loud crack, his head jerks to the side, and he slides to the ground, sightless eyes staring up at the brittle stars. The third lunges forward with his knife, but she easily bats it aside. She grabs him by the shoulders and drags him into the darkness of the alley. He screams, a terrible cry of pain and horror that fades to a wet gurgle before eventually stopping.

A moment later the woman steps back into the light. She uses her pinky to wipe the blood from the side of her mouth, then straightens her suit and smiles brightly at the man. She holds her arm out.

"Shall we, Brother?"

"Indeed, Sister. Let us finish this."

They move away from the alley, stepping over the pools of blood now staining the freshly fallen snow. They turn onto Cromwell Street, moving through the dim light given off by snow-obscured Tesla globes. They stop outside the Natural History Museum, craning their heads back to take in the tall spires that flank the front entrance.

"Inelegant," says the woman.

"Agreed. It will have to go."

There is movement from the shadows along the side of the

The Osiris Curse

building. A figure appears, wearing a dark cloak with the hood pulled low over its face. The figure approaches the siblings, then drops to his knees, the cloak billowing out in the snow around him like a pool of liquid.

“Masters. The Hermetic Order of Osiris is here to serve. As ever it has been. As ever it will be.”

The siblings exchange amused looks, but the kneeling figure does not see.

“Rise, loyal one.”

The figure in the cloak straightens.

“The guards are dealt with?” asks the man.

“All dead, Most High One.”

“And he is here?”

“He entered at five o’ clock this afternoon.”

“Take us to him.”

The acolyte bows and leads the siblings behind the museum. There are small huts and sheds scattered around the lot. The acolyte heads directly for one of them and holds the door open. Inside, the siblings are confronted with a hidden door that has been propped open with the broken arm of a statue.

“He is alone?” asks the woman.

“He is.”

“Follow us.”

Beyond the hidden door is a set of stairs leading deep underground. The siblings follow them down, finally emerging into a huge, echoing factory. The ceiling is distant, the walls lost in shadow. There are half-constructed machines cast haphazardly around, some in the process of being dismantled, others in the process of construction. There is a high-pitched whining coming from somewhere up ahead, and a moment later a massive dome of electricity bursts from the roof and grounds itself in metal plates in the floor.

The siblings walk forward, unconcerned, and after a moment can make out a man inside this dome of lightning. He is seated on a chair reading a newspaper.

The lightning abruptly vanishes. The air tastes of tin. The man notices them for the first time and gets to his feet, angry.

“Who are you? You cannot come in here!”

The man in the purple suit draws a pistol. It is plated with silver gleaming in the light. It has engravings of lizards on the barrel.

“Sit down, Mr. Tesla.”

Nikola Tesla looks nervously at the gun, then slumps back into his chair. He smoothes his mustache down. “What is it you want?”

“Justice, Mr. Tesla. We want justice.”

Tesla frowns, uncertain. “Justice? Have I wronged you in some way?”

For the first time there is a slip of control in the siblings. Both of them stiffen, angry. No, *furious*.

“Have you *wronged* us? Mr. Tesla you have wronged many, many thousands. My people are dying because of you.”

Tesla is shocked. “What is this? I have done nothing!”

The woman steps forward. “Nothing? You say you have done nothing, you whose inventions are responsible for so much pain! You are evil, Nikola Tesla.”

“I am no such thing. What pain? What inventions are you talking about?”

“All of them,” says the man, and he fires the gun.

The bullet hits Tesla in the chest. He cries out and falls backward over his chair. After a moment, he pulls himself to his knees. He touches the blood on his chest with a trembling hand and looks accusingly at the siblings.

“You . . . you *shot* me!”

The man fires again. Tesla jerks backward and lands on his back.

t h e o s i r i s c u r s e

His sightless eyes stare up at the distant ceiling. The man puts the gun away and gestures for the acolyte to come forward.

“Do it,” he says.

The acolyte nods and hurries to the body . The man and the woman turn to face each other.

“It is begun,” he says.

“It is begun,” she repeats, satisfaction evident in her words.