

The Adventure of the Devil's Footprints - DevF
Double-Action Detective Stories, 1956
The Return of Solar Pons

Date - Copper/January, 1927

The Case

The Reverend Ambrose Dially, who harbors a severe dislike of owls, has disappeared outside the church of his Tetfield parish. On the ground, leading away from where the reverend's tracks end, are hoofed footprints. Detective-Sergeant Athelney Moore from Aylesbury comes to Praed Street and takes Pons and Parker to the site of the mystery. Pons quickly discovers a hidden stash of gold and bank notes that leads to the solution.

Quotes

- Pons: *Capital, Parker! Something of the ratiocinative process seems to be rubbing off on you.*
- Pons: *All crime is a little short of idiotic.*

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Comments

- Reverend Dially is not the only retiring clergyman encountered in the Canon. Dially apparently avoided all social interaction, his only presence in the community being the performance of his duties. This is reminiscent of the Bishop Lamson encountered in *The Bishop's Companion*. Hiding from a criminal past by serving as a minister does not seem to work out very well in these two instances.
- Pons' description of how the murder was committed is difficult to accept.
"Therefore he went up through the tree, caught by a noosed rope swung over a limb so that he could easily be drawn up out of his tracks. And from the tree he went over to the church roof, down the wall of the building, and in, through a door or a window, and was carried to his grave here..."

The killer had to be in the tree to drop the noose over his victim. It seems hard to believe that the killer could do this, and then maneuver both himself and dead weight up the rest of the tree, over to a church roof, down the wall and into the building. The killer then repeated the path backwards to finish where he started, in the tree. There is no evidence that he left any signs of this passage. This could not have been an easy task, to say the least.

Accepting Pons' reconstruction, the killer would have been quite strong: a point raised by Parker. Pons points out that the vicar was a "small, frail man." That seems insufficient argument and a gangling man of sixty does not immediately seem to fit the bill.

- Pons references one of his unchronicled cases, "that little matter of the Sulgrave Squire two years" before. There is no other mention of this case in the Canon.
- August Derleth talked about the inspiration for this story in his essay, *The Sources of the Tales*:

He refers to "the almost legendary account of strange footprints in the snow discovered February 1, 1855 in Devonshire – footprints that resembled some very large hooved creature, all in a line that led through seventeen towns for a distance of approximately a hundred miles, leading along roads, through woods, fields, and gardens, across streams and farmhouse roofs alike, and made without any sound to alert the natives. The mystery of the footprints was never solved."
- This excerpt is also another example of an observation made in several other places that Derleth wrote some extremely long sentences.
- Elements of the Sherlock Holmes tale, *The Adventure of the Resident Patient*, resonate in this story. The Owl Gang brings to mind The Worthingdon Bank Gang. In both cases, at least one gang member ratted on the others, receiving a lesser punishment and then going into hiding with the loot. Then, a newspaper article about the release of imprisoned gang members frightens the squealer, who fears vengeance.
- Pons has a positive attitude towards Sergeant Moore, who makes his only appearance in the Canon in this case.