

The Number 243: The Paw

In which the contents of Hell are seen to spill over into the world of the living

by [Paul Martin Freeman](#) (August 2023)



Omnibus II, Anders Zorn, 1892

'Twas on the 243 from Wood Green Station,
While on his way to busy Waterloo,
That Mr K from Kerry on vacation
Was seen to cause a fuss and much ado.

While glancing through the pages of his daily
He spotted something moving on the floor.
The item he'd describe as small and scaly,
Resembling, so he thought, a hand or paw.

The thing was crawling quietly down the aisleway
Between the feet of people standing there,
Yet with the bus so full as this was Friday
The passengers, it seemed, were unaware.

But then he felt as though the paw had seen him,
Though lacking any eyes, of course, or head,
For suddenly it turned and crept beneath him
Then started slowly crawling up his leg.

Now, Mr K had served in Ireland's army;
His ancestry he traced to Finn McCool.
His kin had fought the English at Killarney
And never would submit to foreign rule.

But paws that crawled across the floor were troubling;
And those that climbed your leg were even more so.
And Mr K perceived his courage crumbling
When shortly after this it reached his torso.

He tried at first to brush it off his clothing;
Yet still the paw advanced towards his head.
And Mr K was overcome with loathing,
And frankly, he'd concede, with utmost dread.

He next began to thump it with his daily,
But still it climbed, apparently unfazed,
While people on the bus there thought him crazy,
Or else were shocked or stared in awe amazed.

It seems, indeed, that none could see the item,

The scaly creature scaling Mr K,
And hence could fathom what could so excite him
To make him act in such a baffling way.

So when it reached its final destination,
And settled down as though it owned the place,
Imagine, if you will, the consternation
With Mr K assaulting now his face.

This latest onslaught triggered pandemonium
With frenzied people desperate to escape;
While Mr K, the object of their odium,
Was fighting for his life, his mouth agape.

It seems though at the height of this commotion
That Mr K produced the winning blow.
For in an excess of deranged emotion
He threw a punch that Finn McCool might throw.

The paw's response is sadly not recorded,
But Mr K himself then hit the floor.
His years of army training were rewarded
As after that he punched himself no more.

The others now reacted in confusion,
With no one sure exactly what to say.
But at the stop they left in some profusion,
Abandoning our hero where he lay.

For once our tale though has a happy ending
As even life allows us now and then.
For Mr K, his many bruises mending,
Was never troubled by the paw again.

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Paul Martin Freeman is an art dealer in London. The poem is from the story of Sludge in *The Bus Poems: Tales Sacred and Profane*, currently in preparation. His book, *A Chocolate Box Menagerie*, is published by New English Review Press and is available [here](#).

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