

## **The Curse of Lamia**

**LAMIA IS A DEMON** who, despite rumours to the contrary, is a male of the cloven hoof variety. One must assume that he works for Mephistopheles, the Prince of Darkness. In silhouette he has curling horns and a bearded face, he's also a shape-shifter and can appear in any scary form he chooses attended by all kinds of horrors and any number of evil emanations. Unseen, he can make the pans in your kitchen rattle and bang, he can wreck your bedroom in a trice, scare the cat clear out of its wits, and drag you to hell through a layer of molten-hot cinders. What's more he can do all this at the bidding of old gypsy women who as everybody knows are often in league with the Devil and particularly good at curses (when they're not too busy stealing other people's children and generally making the lives of God-fearing Romanians, and unsuspecting Hungarians, a complete misery).

I was reminded of all this last Friday when I went to see the movie, *Drag Me To Hell*. I had seen this strange injunction plastered across buses and bus shelters throughout Manchester for the previous fortnight so I realised that this was a must-see picture. "Drag Me To Hell" is the chant that Christine Brown and her pals have to intone at a séance designed to call Lamia, the evil old goat, into the world so that they can trick him into entering the body of a real earthly white goat; once the evil one's spirit is in possession of the animal's body they can kill it, and the goat, with a single whack of a bloody great knife.

At any rate, this is the plan. Perhaps inevitably it all goes horribly wrong. A titanic struggle takes place as Lamia's spirit hops into the goat, and out again; the sumptuous marble room is in an uproar as the demonic forces summoned by the injunction, "Take Me To Hell", whip and lash about the place, upsetting

candlesticks and disordering the drapes; the medium dies of spiritual exertion, and those of us in the Standard Seating almost die of excitement as Lamia makes good his escape.

Christine Brown, a bank account administrator, has unwittingly opened up the mouth of Hell simply by refusing an extension on a home loan. Mrs Ganush, an old lady of vaguely Transylvanian provenance, is about to be thrown, bag and baggage, onto the street, unless the bank gives her more time to pay. She comes to the bank to plead for the foreclosure notice and threat of eviction to be withdrawn, only to be greeted by Christine who, at the bidding of her boss and her desire for promotion, sternly rejects the old lady's appeal. Christine calls Security and Mrs Ganush is unceremoniously cast into the street to face eviction and ruin.

This is Christine's big mistake; by siding with her boss she has earned the wrath of Mrs Ganush. The old lady dies of grief and fury at the loss of her home, but not before calling down the Curse of Lamia on Christine's unsuspecting soul. This is a somewhat severe penalty to impose upon Christine, a junior and rather naïve bank employee, but she has made the fatal error of hardening her heart and siding with the dark forces of capitalist reaction; as a consequence she does genuinely deserve to be cast into the pit of everlasting suffering.

This is what happens in the absence of strong trade unions and robust working class resistance to foreclosures, evictions, and mass unemployment. Those seeking justice and revenge, the victims of the recession, are forced to rely upon Gypsy curses and the fulfilment of the blood feud between God and the Chief of His fallen angels, Satan himself. Some people might think that this is not an entirely rational or reliable response to the problems thrown up by the recession, but it certainly makes you think. If you could guarantee that anybody who signs the foreclosure and eviction notices on a family home was destined to be cast into the fiery furnace it might improve matters no end. But

this is, after all, only a movie; in the real world we need more than curses to cope with stony-faced account managers and their heartless supervisors.

On top of this it is doubtful whether promoting foolish stereotypes of Gypsies, Romany or otherwise, is a good idea. Sorely oppressed in Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, Gypsies can probably do without Hollywood retailing historic myths concerning their special relationship with the Evil One. Only fully emancipated during the 1850s, Europe's Gypsies are still the victims of discrimination, high levels of illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, and widespread police repression. Periodically brutalised and murdered by supporters of *Noua Dreapta* (The New Right), heirs to the legionnaires of the Archangel Michael and the Iron Guardists of Corneliu Codreanu, the Gypsies of modern Romania and Eastern and Central Europe do not need a revival of Hammer House of Horror depictions of the dark mysteries associated with their people.

Having said this, we are still left with the problem of foreclosures and evictions. If not Gypsy curses, then what? Despite a few signs of improvement here and there in retail or the housing market, there are considerable problems, which have still to work their way through the economy, and great areas of fragility, which can be tipped into crisis by the slightest disturbance of stock prices, or exposure to failing credit card debts as unemployment continues to surge ahead.

Brokers and investment managers brought about the present crisis by attempting to violate market forces. By setting artificial prices for assets of dubious value, assets that had never been allowed to find their real price in open trading in the market, dealers in London and New York wrecked the capitalist system, bringing it to the very edge of ruin. These capitalists forgot that commodities are supposed to find their price in open competition in the market – it is through this mechanism – they have always argued – that capitalism ensures that poor value and inefficiency are driven out of the system by the free reign of the price

mechanism; it is by means of ruthless competition that the good drives out the bad.

This is the theory, in practice of course the investment brokers and bankers concealed the level of their exposure to risk by disguising bad assets, mixing them in with those of better quality, or inventing new financial products and instruments whose dubious origins and shaky connections lay hidden in a bewildering mesh of electronic transactions and paper trails. On top of this the capitalists actually involved in making goods or in selling non-financial services have for a number of years found it increasingly difficult to make profits. As profit margins have tightened many of them resorted to using as much of their capital as possible to buy into the lucrative business of trading increasingly obscure but profitable financial instruments being sold by those in the financial sector.

In this way, the capitalists who should have been investing in research and development, in new products and production techniques, have been drawn into the web woven by the attractive but inherently unstable financial sector. Instead of taking lower profits and ploughing much more into improving the efficiency or their workers and their production techniques many corporate bosses shifted as much as possible of their profits into financial investments in the hope of hefty and quick returns.

The result, as we now know, is that the collapse of the financial sector is dragging down both, non-financial services, and manufacturing in a maelstrom of bankruptcies, mergers, and job losses. So far the falls in GDP we have witnessed are not on the scale of the early nineteen thirties, but in a number of countries like Latvia or Iceland or Hungary they are coming close. In other larger economies like Japan, Germany, and Britain they are serious enough, and look set to get very much worse.

Evidently, we are going to have to do much more than simply put a hex on the culprits, if we are to avoid the grisly fate of Christine Brown pulled slowly down through the fiery coals to eternal damnation below.