

# **THE GREEN MILLENNIUM**

# Table of Contents

I

II

III

IV

V

VI

VII

VIII

IX

X

XI

XII

XIII

XIV

XV

XVI

XVII

XVIII

XIX

XX

FRITZ LEIBER

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**AN ACE BOOK**

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**For BOB, FRANK, HANK, GERT, and WENDELL**

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The world Phil Gish lived in was not a pretty one, and Phil didn't enjoy living in it. He was disillusioned, purposeless, hopeless, and haunted by the fear that a robot would take over his job. But then Phil was a timid person, not much given to adventure seeking. If he hadn't been so mild he might have found his kicks at All Amusements, the syndicated playground where anyone could find

fun, providing he had the proper sadistic and otherwise aberrated elements in his personality. But Phil was good—and bored.

And then one day a cat perched on his window—not an ordinary cat—a green cat. For the first time in years Phil was happy. He promptly named the cat Lucky because he somehow knew that as long as the cat stayed with him he'd feel fine. But Lucky didn't stay long. In a matter of minutes he had disappeared into All Amusements park. It was then that Phil became involved in a grotesque world, peopled with the most extraordinary personalities. Just what the cat is and its ultimate meaning is the secret of it all. You will be surprised.

# I

Phil Gish woke up feeling as good as if all his previous life had happened to two other guys—poor, miserable clunks!

Usually his whip-cracking reflexes had him out of bed in a flash and jerking on his shorts and sockasins while he frantically hunted around for the jar of beard-dissolving cream. But this time he was able to outsmart all tyrannous nerve-impulses and keep his eyes closed in order to enjoy the unprecedented sensation all to himself, not even sharing it with the advertisement-covered walls of his tiny bachelor apartment.

Why, it was simply wonderful, he decided after a bit. Outrageously, impossibly wonderful!

He actually felt as if this were not a world in which hot and cold wars had been gushing unpredictably for fifty years like temperamental faucets, in which the Federal Bureau of Loyalty and Fun Incorporated ruled the U. S. A. in the name of that drunken, hymn-singing farmer, President Robert T. Barnes, and in which (according to the Kremlin Newsmoon, located on an earth-circling satellite vehicle) a new plan was being considered for exchanging the descendants of prisoners taken in the half-century-old Korean War.

And as if he, Phil Gish, weren't a luck-forsaken little guy who on waking at eight o'clock this morning hadn't taken four sleeping pills in order to kill the day and temporarily forget that he had just lost another job to a robot who did it five times as fast and twice as

accurately, and that he'd had a blow-up because of it and been coldly advised to see a psychiatrist.

He took a long, luxurious breath. Even the air smelt and felt different, as if dusted with some golden chemical that banished care.

He opened his eyes and looked down at his pale chest with the two lone hairs that were a sardonic last farewell from glorious jungle ape-hood. But this time the word that came to him was "slim," not "scrawny." He rather liked his body, he decided—a neat and compact, if not exactly out-size, bit of tissue. He yawned, stretched, scratched where the two hairs were, and looked around. The green cat sat on the sill of the large open circular window, smiling at him.

"Hey, am I dreaming?"

The sound of his own voice, with its hint of a morning croak, answered that question.

*Or have I really blasted off from behind the hair line?* The second question, thought not spoken, was quickly suppressed. He felt too good to let it worry him. If this was insanity, then three cheers for paranoia!

Besides, there were all sorts of natural explanations of the cat's somewhat unconventional color. Just yesterday Phil had seen a young matron leading two rose-colored poodles. A flash of what might be an off-the-bosom dress under her cloak had moved him to pass close enough to hear her assure her companion, "They aren't dye-jobs, you mood-mad man. They're mutations!"

Also, weren't some animals naturally green, like the tree-sloth? Though he seemed to recall that the tree-sloth's hue was due to a

fungus or mold, and there certainly wasn't any mold on the burnished bundle of benignity on his window sill.

"Hiya, Lucky," he greeted softly. From the very first he had decided to connect the cat with his newborn, incredible sense of well-being. If there was going to be a new era in his life, it was a good idea to have a symbol for it—a symbol green as spring itself. Besides, it felt that way.

"C'mere, Lucky," he called without lifting his head from the spongy pillow. "Here, Kitty."

The second invitation, which sounded a trifle silly to Phil as soon as he said it, wasn't necessary. The cat at once dropped its plump-tummied body from the window sill and trotted toward him like a soft-shod fat little horse. Phil felt an odd increase, almost frightening, in the calm joy inside him. The cat disappeared momentarily under the angle of the bedside. Then a little green face came over the edge and two tiny green paws placed themselves beside it, and two coppery eyes inspected him.

"How are you, fellow?" Phil asked. "Glad to make your acquaintance. You're a cool little cuss, all right. Where did you come from?"

The little face tipped upward.

"From upstairs?" Phil asked and instantly chuckled at himself for interpreting the movement as a gesture. "Why not stay with me for a while? I like your looks and I admire your color. Often wished I were green myself. Anything for variety—begging your pardon."

It was a strange and curiously attractive cat face. The ears were large, the forehead high, the nose-button lost in furry down, the

whiskers hardly apparent, and the mouth had a suggestion of a pucker or pout. For a fleeting instant Phil had the notion Lucky might look rather different, rather less like a cat, if caught unawares. And he was really very green—the green of tarnished copper, only brighter.

Thinking the word "he," Phil wondered for a fleeting instant about Lucky's sex. The fat tummy was suggestive. Yet he was somehow sure the cat was a male.

Then Lucky smiled again and Phil was aware only of feelings. He reached out a tentative hand, jerked it back when a little paw flicked out at it, then shamefacedly corrected the gesture. The little paw touched his middle finger. Phil stroked the silken paw in turn. Neither time could he feel a hint of claws. They must all be tucked inside their smooth sheathes.

"Now we're friends," Phil said huskily. The cat sprang fearlessly onto the bed. Coppery eyes came close. A furry cheek briefly brushed Phil's with casual masculine friendliness. Sudden tears smarted in Phil's eyes, enough to brim the lids but not to run over.

What a lonely, empty-lived fool he must be, he told himself, that a cat could make him cry. Yet it was true enough. All his life had been a fading. His parents had seemed warm and wonderful at first, but then he had begun to sense their gray uncertainties and boredoms. School had been full of breath-taking promise at one point, with infinite vistas of knowledge and idealistic brotherhood opening up; but too many of the vistas had ended in signs saying "restricted" or "subversive" or the even more maddening blank signs of calculated silence—just as man had promised himself he'd reach the planets soon, but hadn't. Phil had had friends, too, at one

time, and had really been in love with girls; but even that had somehow become washed out and worthless. And then the endless business of being beaten out of jobs by white-collar robots, beginning with the mail-sorting robots who fed envelopes into the proper slots by scanning their addresses photoelectrically. The only thing robots couldn't do, it seemed, was sit in foxholes. That was one place where Phil recalled no mechanical competition.

Yes, it had been a very empty, purposeless life indeed, Phil told himself, at the same time wondering why even that thought could not mar his present happiness.

He came out of his reverie and saw that the cat was marching down the bed, closely inspecting his naked body.

"Hey, we're friends, but that's going too far. Leave me *some* privacy!" Chuckling, he swung out of bed, grabbing up a light robe as his body left the cone of radiant heat projected from the ceiling fixture. While shouldering into the robe he hummed a couple of bars from "Kiss Me, Darling, in Free-Fall" and did a shuffling step that brought the cat hurrying over to play tag with his toes.

"Where *did* you come from, Lucky?" Phil repeated and turned toward the window. In the three steps it took him to reach it, his gaze lit on the near-empty dispenser of sleeping pills and for a moment the eerie doubt came back: mightn't this morning's overdose have triggered off or paralleled a really big change in his mind? After all, this cat wasn't normal (and neither were hallucinations!) and his crazy, inexplicable happiness was altogether too much like the inner world of godlike perfection into which the paranoiac is supposed to retreat.

But then he was at the window experiencing a new twist in his mood and the doubt was forgotten.

The window opened on a deep, very narrow bay in the remodeled monster hotel in which Phil roomed. If he risked his neck by leaning out very far, he could just manage to look out of the bay and glimpse an advertisement-encrusted corner of Fun Incorporated's wrestling center and the helicopter field on its roof. The hotel had been built as a luxury palace for the new war-rich of the 1970's but during the great housing shortage of the 1980's its vast rooms had been cut up into tiny sleeping cells. It retained, however, at least one feature from its lordly days: the large circular windows formed of two sheets of polarizing glass, the inner of which could be rotated, allowing a person to blacken his window or have it fully transparent or enjoy any shade of twilight. One other very unusual luxury touch was that the windows could actually be opened, swinging on pivots at top and bottom. Nowadays, with radiant sleep-heating general throughout the hotel and the air-conditioning system anything but trustworthy, this last feature was put to real use more often than might have been expected, though windows were still kept closed most of the daytime.

It had always seemed to Phil that the great gray wall just ten feet from his window, with its rows of ominous portholes, many of them blackened, was the grimmest sight in the world—a symbol of the way he was walled off from life and people.

But now, as he stood leaning out just a little, his cropped hair brushing the tarnished circular rim, it seemed to him that he could imagine his way through that wall as if it were made of some material that conducted emotion as copper conducts electricity.

Not see or think through it, but *feel* through it to the multiple texture of warm, pitiful, admirable, ridiculous human lives in the cubicles behind: the two-fifths happy ones, the nine-tenths sad ones, the ones who nursed fears and frustrations because you had to nurse something, the ones who hammered fears and frustrations into a painful armor, the old man apprehensively sorting his limp ration stamps from three communo-capitalist wars, the boy playing spaceship and pretending the blacked-out window was the porthole of a comic-book intergalactic liner, the three unemployed secretaries—one of them pacing—the lovers whose rendezvous was tainted with worries about the Federal Bureau of Morality, the fat man feeling a girl's caress by radio handie and thinking of something long ago, the old woman coddling her dread of war-germs and atomic ashes by constantly dusting, dusting, dusting....

Well, his new self certainly had a vivid imagination, Phil decided with a smile.

An old hand came out of a porthole three floors down and shook something—or nothing—from a dustpan.

Coincidence, of course, or else he'd once watched the woman without thinking about it—nevertheless, Phil chose to interpret the event as an encouraging confirmation of his new feeling of outgoingness. Then the smile left his lips as he thought of another aspect of the opposite wall.

This window was the vantage point where he had spent countless drearily excited hours spying on the activities of all the young women whose cubicles were even remotely within range. Not the new girl—the one who wore her black hair in old-fashioned pony style—in the room straight across, although she was quite beautiful

in a sprightly, animal way, and he sometimes heard her practicing tap-dancing. No, she was a bit too close and besides, he was vaguely frightened of her. There was something eerily dryad-like about her and, in any case, she blacked out her porthole religiously. It was blacked out now, though slightly ajar.

But all the other girls were recipients of his untiring, sterile interest. The cute green-blond just below and to the left, for instance, Miss Phoebe Filmer (he'd once taken the unprecedentedly realistic step of finding out her name), why, he'd sacrificed a sizable chunk of his leisure time to that tantalizing minx. There she was at this very moment dithering around in a short play robe, inspecting an assortment of wispy lingerie—a very promising situation that normally would have held Phil helpless for twenty minutes or more. But now he found he could look at her and then look away without the faintest gnawing worry he might miss something. Good Lord, if he wanted to see more, in any sense, of Miss Phoebe Filmer, he'd scrape up an acquaintance with her.

"Prrrt!" A feathery, furry ball came into his hand and he looked down at Lucky's apple-green face framed by his curving forefinger and thumb.

"What d'ya want, cat?"

Lucky ducked out of the cupped hand with a twist that let his forehead and ear be rubbed, and put his front paws on the window rim. Phil quickly advanced his hand so that it lightly circled the cat's chest. He didn't want Lucky to get back out on the little ledge that led to either side of the window. In fact, as Phil now definitely realized, he didn't want Lucky to leave him at all, though

something told him he wouldn't be able to stop Lucky if the green cat really wanted to go.

It occurred to Phil, with a certain shamefaced satisfaction, that all pets were strictly forbidden in the Skyway Towers (cats and dogs were pretty rare since the germ war days when they'd been slaughtered as possible carriers) and so Lucky's owner wouldn't be able to do anything openly about getting him back.

But Lucky seemed to have no intention of leaving. He hopped to the floor and looked eagerly at Phil.

"Prrrt!"

"Do you want something to eat? Is that it?"

"Prrrt-prt!"

Phil took mental inventory of his snack box and found himself thinking of the cranberry concentrate. Wildly inappropriate—and yet something assured him that it would be just right for Lucky.

It was done quickly: a dark-red marble that swelled to a glistening ruby golf ball at the touch of water, and then, at another sudden inward prompting, the syrupy contents of a vitamino capsule poured over it.

The last ingredient smelled rather rank and by the time he set the odd sundae on the floor, Phil was feeling quite doubtful. However, Lucky examined it with all signs of approval, mewing in eagerness. But then instead of beginning to eat, he looked up at Phil. Phil thought he understood: cats have their special proprieties and delicacies. The little chap wanted to eat in private.

"Okay, fellow, I'll go shower. And I won't peek."

Stepping inside the bathroom, he set the shower control to alternate tepid and very warm. Instead it chose irresponsibly to alternate icy and steaming, so that he leaped out with a yell. But the incident didn't even scratch his mood. As he toweled himself (he didn't like the air drier and toweling robots made him uneasy) he sang:

*We're out in space, they've cut the jet,  
There isn't any ceiling, floor, or wall.  
Let's dance on air, or better yet—  
Hug me, love me, darling, in free-fall!*

He came out of the bathroom feeling like an emperor and fully determined to inspect the world he owned, the world that was any man's for the asking and a little courage. As he slipped on singlet, trousers, sockasins and jacket, he explained his feelings to Lucky, who had cleaned up every bit of his colorful meal.

"You see, it's this way, fellow: I've always been three-quarters dead. But not any more. I'm through with being scared and stand-offish and bored. No more filing, dial-watching, and tape-cutting jobs, with some about-to-be-invented robot breathing down my neck. I'm just going out and look things over, talk to people, find out what it's all about. I'm going to have adventures, really live. Some program, eh? And you know who's responsible for it, fellow? You are."

Lucky seemed fairly to fluoresce in appreciation. He fluffed his gleaming green fur.

Phil wondered what time it was. His wrist-watch had gone dead yesterday, the cranky thing, only five months after having the battery replaced. He stuck his head out the window and looked up the dizzy gray crack to where the portholes were tiny dots and the

slit ended in a ribbon of blue sky. Only the top floor to the east was yellow with true sunlight, though the false sunlight from the sodium mirror circling the earth to make evening light for this city was beginning to show about eight stories down.

He scooped up Lucky without a thought of leaving him behind or a worry as to the attention he might attract. But the verdant cat sprang from his arms and made for the hall door, looking back as if to say, "I'm right there with you and game for any adventure, too, but I don't need a nurse."

Side by side they walked to the stairs and down to twenty-eight—the overworked elevator stopped only at even-numbered floors. And there he ran into Phoebe Filmer, play robe swishing and apparently headed for the snack bar on twenty-eight.

"Hello, Miss Filmer," he heard himself say. "I've admired you for a long time."

"You have?" she said, glancing at him sideways. "How did you know my name?"

"Just asked the desk robot who the beautiful girl was in 28-303a."

She tittered with a faintly flirtatious contempt. "You don't talk to the desk robot. You just punch buttons and it won't give out names when you punch room numbers, unless you have a government key."

"I have a way with robots," Phil explained. "I win their confidence with small talk."

"Well," Miss Filmer observed, turning her head and running her hand through her green-gold hair.

"Say, how do you like my green cat?" Phil inquired.

"A green cat!" Miss Filmer exclaimed excitedly. She looked down quickly and then up skeptically. "Where?"

Phil looked down too. Lucky wasn't anywhere in sight. A hunk of ice materialized inside his chest. "Excuse me," he said. "I hope I'll see you again."

He raced to the stub corridor. Lucky was standing in front of the elevator.

"Gee, fellow," Phil told him. "Don't give me heart failure."

## II

The street snarled at Phil. The snarl came chiefly from a charged-up electric hot rod that swerved close to the curb to remove a triangular chunk from the rump of a fat man who had been too slow in skittering to safety. A second look showed he was not a fat man, but a thin man in a balloon suit. It deflated rapidly, and he sat down in its limp folds on the curb and began to sob. Balloon suits were of no real protection to pedestrians, except by increasing the apparent target, but they continued as a fad. During the last war they had been pumped full of hydrogen as a shield against neutrons until a couple of small but unpleasant explosions in crowded shelters had caused the government to crack down.

After snarling, the street continued to growl deep in its throat—it had two lower levels. The growl was composed of the hum of electrics, the subterranean rumble of heavier traffic, the yak-yak of competing vocal advertisements, and the nervous shuffle of feet that was the same when Rome and Babylon were young, but that was intensified here because most of the women's feet were on platforms three to ten inches high.

Neither the growl nor the snarl disturbed Phil. Normally he'd already have had his ear plugs tucked in, his face fixed straight ahead, his eyes nervously questing for hot rods, which were known to jump curbs. But today he simply wanted to drink it all in, to see the things he'd always been blind to, to note the anxious but apathetic expressions on the faces of the pedestrians, to sense the invisible lines of force that, like spider webs or marionette strings, joined them to the space-overflowing advertisements, which

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