

**Dr. Bob's Nightmare:** "I was between Scylla and Charybdis now, because if I did not drink my stomach tortured me, and if I did my nerves did the same thing."- *Alcoholics Anonymous* p175

(Now, make no fuss about all the jumping around between Latin and Greek names for the characters—  
it's the way it's gonna be, dang it, and if it bothers you, tuff.)

### **Scylla (SILL-uh)**

(Greek mythology) *a sea nymph transformed into a sea monster who lived on one side of a narrow strait; Scylla drowned and devoured sailors who tried to escape Charybdis (a whirlpool) on the other side of the strait. She was one of the children of Phorcys and Ceto known as the Phorcydes.*

### **Charybdis (kah-RIB-dis)**

(Greek mythology) *a ship-devouring whirlpool lying on the other side of a narrow strait from Scylla. Traditionally the aforementioned strait has been associated with the Strait of Messina between Italy and Sicily but more recently this theory has been challenged and the alternative location of Cape Skillia in north west Greece has been suggested. Charybdis, it is said, was once a nymph, the daughter of Poseidon and Gaia. She flooded lands for her father's underwater kingdom until Zeus turned her into a monster for stealing and eating some of Herakles' sheep. Her fate was to be chained to the ocean bottom, and suck water in and out three times a day.*

Scylla was dreadful- with six heads, twelve feet and a voice like the howl of a maddened dog. She dwelt in a sea-cave looking to the west, far up the face of a huge cliff. Out of her cave she stuck her heads, fishing for marine creatures and snatching the sailors out of passing ships. Within a bowshot of this cliff was another lower cliff with a great fig tree growing on it. Under this second rock dwelt Charybdis, who thrice a day sucked in (and thrice spouted out) the sea water. Ugh.

### **How a beautiful nymph became a sea monster: or the dangers of ingesting bad grass...**

...ever hear the phrase "sea-change"?  
... "beware a woman scorned"?

Glaucus was a fisherman. One day he had drawn his nets to land, and had taken a great many fishes of various kinds. So he emptied his net, and proceeded to sort the fishes on the grass.

The place where he stood was a beautiful island in the river, a solitary spot, uninhabited, and not used for pasturage of cattle, nor ever visited by any but himself. On a sudden, the fishes, which had been laid on the grass, began to revive and move their fins as if they were in the water; and while he looked on astonished, they one and all moved off to the water, plunged in and swam away.

He did not know what to make of this, whether some god had done it, or some secret power in the herbage. "What herb has such a power?" he exclaimed; and gathering some, he tasted it. Scarce had the juices of the plant reached his palate when he found himself agitated with a longing desire for the water. He could no longer restrain himself, but bidding farewell to earth, he plunged into the stream.

The gods of the water received him graciously, and admitted him to the honor of their society. They obtained the consent of Oceanus and Tethys, the sovereigns of the sea, that all that was mortal in him should be washed away. A hundred rivers poured their waters over him. Then he lost all sense of his former nature and all consciousness.

When he recovered, he found himself changed in form and mind. His hair was sea-green, and trailed behind him on the water; his shoulders grew broad, and what had been thighs and legs assumed the form of a fish's tail. The sea-gods complimented him on the change of his appearance, and he himself was pleased with his looks.

One day Glaucus saw the beautiful maiden Scylla, the favorite of the water-nymphs, rambling on the shore, (naked, by the way) and when she had found a sheltered nook, laving her limbs in the clear water. He fell in love with her, and showing himself on the surface, spoke to her, saying such things as he thought most likely to win her to stay; for she turned to run immediately on sight of him and ran till she had gained a cliff overlooking the sea.

Here she stopped and turned round to see whether it was a god or a sea-animal, and observed with wonder his shape and color.

Glaucus, partly emerging from the water, and supporting himself against a rock, said, "Maiden, I am no monster, nor a sea-animal, but a god; and neither Proteus nor Triton ranks higher than I. Once I was a mortal, and followed the sea for a living; but now I belong wholly to it." Then he told the story of his metamorphosis and how he had been promoted to his present dignity, and added, "But what avails all this if it fails to move your heart?" He was going on in this strain, but Scylla turned and hastened away.

Glaucus was in despair, but it occurred to him to consult the enchantress, Circe. Accordingly he repaired to her island, the same where afterwards Ulysses landed, as we shall see in another story.

After mutual salutations, he said, "Goddess, I entreat your pity; you alone can relieve the pain I suffer. The power of herbs I know as well as any one, for it is to them I owe my change of form I love Scylla. I am ashamed to tell you how I have sued and promised to her, and how scornfully she has treated me. I beseech you to use your incantations, or potent herbs, if they are more prevailing, not to cure me of my love, for that I do not wish, but to make her share it and yield me a like return."

To which Circe replied, for she was not insensible to the attractions of the sea-green deity, "You had better pursue a willing object; you are worthy to be sought, instead of having to seek in vain. Be not diffident, know your own worth. I protest to you that even I, goddess though I be, and learned in the virtues of plants and spells, should not know how to refuse you. If she scorns you, scorn her; meet one who is ready to meet you half way, and thus make a due return to both at once."

To these words Glaucus replied, "Sooner shall trees grow at the bottom of the ocean, and seaweed on the top of the mountains, than I will cease to love Scylla, and her alone."

The goddess was indignant, but she could not punish him, neither did she wish to do so, for she liked him too well; so she turned all her wrath against her rival, poor Scylla. She took plants of poisonous powers and mixed them together, with incantations and charms. Then she passed through the crowd of gambolling beasts, the victims of her art, and proceeded to the coast of Sicily, where Scylla lived. There was a little bay on the shore to which Scylla used to resort, in the heat of the day, to breathe the air of the sea, and to bathe in its waters.

Here the goddess poured her poisonous mixture, and muttered over it incantations of mighty power.

Scylla came as usual and plunged into the water up to her waist. What was her horror to perceive a brood of serpents and barking monsters surrounding her! At first she could not imagine they

were a part of herself, and tried to run from them, and to drive them away; but as she ran she carried them with her, and when she tried to touch her limbs, she found her hands touch only the yawning jaws of monsters.

Scylla remained rooted to the spot. Her temper grew as ugly as her form, and she took pleasure in devouring hapless mariners who came within her grasp. Thus she destroyed six of the companions of Ulysses, and tried to wreck the ships of Aeneas, till at last she was turned into a rock, and as such still continues to be a terror to mariners.

### **Twin Terrors**

Avoiding Scylla, mariners fell into Charybdis. Trying to avoid one error, they fall into another; or, trying to avoid one danger, they fall into another equally fatal. Scylla and Charybdis are two rocks between Italy and Sicily. In one was a cave where "Scylla dwelt," and on the other Charybdis dwelt under a fig tree. Ships that tried to avoid one were often wrecked on the other rock. It was Circe who changed Scylla into a frightful sea monster, and Jupiter (Zeus) who changed Charybdis into a whirlpool.

*I'm unclear what actually happened to the weed dipping, love sick Glaucus, but it's obvious that nothing good happens in the end to those who mess around with body and mind altering herbs... However, apparently after a successful 28 day treatment program, the minor sea god pops up once in awhile in other narratives, warning Jason and the Argonauts not to mess with Hercules' Labors, for example, and to occasionally offer some prophecy or prediction and help for other sailors... etc.*

**"When I shun Scylla your father, I fall into Charybdis your mother."**

Shakespeare: Merchant of Venice, iii. 5.

**"Between Scylla and Charybdis"** - Between two difficulties or fatal works.

To **"fall from Scylla into Charybdis"** - out of the frying pan into the fire.

**"Caught between the Scylla and Charybdis"**

("Wrapped Around Your Finger"(Sting); *The Police*; **"Synchronicity"** June 1983)

You consider me the young apprentice

**Caught between the Scylla and Charybdis**

Hypnotized by you if I should linger

Staring at the ring around your finger

I have only come here seeking knowledge

Things they would not teach me of in college

I can see the destiny you sold

Turned into a shining band of gold

I'll be wrapped around your finger

I'll be wrapped around your finger

Mephistopheles is not your name

But I know what you're up to just the same

I will listen hard to your tuition

And you will see it come to it's fruition

I'll be wrapped around your finger

I'll be wrapped around your finger

Devil and the deep blue sea behind me

Vanish in the air, you'll never find me

I will turn your face to alabaster

Then you'll find your servant is your master

You'll be wrapped around my finger

You'll be wrapped around my finger

You'll be wrapped around my finger

**Now, Ulysses (or Odysseus) had some trouble with Scylla and Charybdis also:**

### **From the Odyssey of Homer:**

Ulysses had been warned by Circe of the two monsters Scylla and Charybdis. We have already met with Scylla in the myth of Glaucus. She dwelt in a cave high up on the cliff, from whence she was accustomed to thrust forth her long necks (for she had six heads), and in each of her mouths to seize one of the crew of every vessel passing within reach. The other terror, Charybdis, was a gulf nearly on a level with the water. Thrice each day the water rushed into a frightful chasm, and thrice was disgorged. Any vessel coming near the whirlpool when the tide was rushing in must inevitably be engulfed; not Neptune himself could save it. On approaching the haunt of the

dread monsters, Ulysses kept strict watch to discover them. The roar of the waters as Charybdis engulfed them gave warning at a distance, but Scylla could nowhere be discerned. While Ulysses and his men watched with anxious eyes the dreadful whirlpool, they were not equally on their guard from the attack of Scylla, and the monster, darting forth her snaky heads, caught six of his men and bore them away shrieking to her den. Ulysses was unable to afford any assistance.

Both Tiresias and Circe had warned him of another danger. After passing Scylla and Charybdis the next land he would make was Thrinacia, an island whereon were pastured the cattle of Helios, the Sun, tended by his daughters Lampetia and Phaethusa. These flocks must not be violated, whatever the wants of the voyagers might be. If this injunction were transgressed, destruction was sure to fall on the offenders. Ulysses would willingly have passed the island of the Sun without stopping, but his companions so urgently pleaded for the rest and refreshment that would be derived from anchoring and passing the night on shore, that Ulysses yielded. He made them swear, however, not to touch the sacred flocks and herds, but to content themselves with what provision they yet had left of the supply that Circe had put on board. So long as this supply lasted the people kept their oath; but contrary winds detained them at the island for a month, and after consuming all their stock of provisions, they were forced to rely upon the birds and fishes they could catch. Famine pressed them, and at last, in the absence of Ulysses, they slew some of the cattle, vainly attempting to make amends for the deed by offering from them a portion to the offended powers. Ulysses, on his return to the shore, was horror-struck at perceiving what they had done, and the more so on account of the portentous signs that followed. The skins crept on the ground, and the joints of meat lowed on the spits while roasting.

The wind becoming fair, they sailed from the island. They had not gone far when the weather changed, and a storm of thunder and lightning ensued. A stroke of lightning shattered their mast, which in its fall killed the pilot. At last the vessel itself went to pieces. The keel and mast floating side by side, Ulysses formed of them a raft to which he clung; and, the wind changing, the waves bore him to Calypso's island. All the rest of the crew perished.

Footnote: A quickie on the rest of the Charybdis debacle of Ulysses/Odysseus : another narrative says this, more or less, is really what happened, at least my paraphrase of the retelling of the telling of the tale:

Now, Ulysses was in a hurry to get back to his wife Penelope, but, having survived the twin terrors, his remaining crew wanted a little R&R on the island of Helios, the sun god...who had 2 beautiful daughters, herds of cattle, and flocks of sheep. Ulysses put the girls, the sheep and the cattle off limits, but of course his sailors violated his orders while he was away praying to the gods for good sailing weather. Ulysses and crew sailed away in a hurry, knowing that Helios and his compatriot Gods were gonna be hacked off, and pretty soon, the big boys were hurling wind and lighting bolts at the ship, driving it back toward Charybdis...you know the rest. Charybdis feasted on the ship and the remaining crew...Ulysses, the sole survivor, wound up on Calypso's Island, Calypso gets the hots for him, and held him as her lover for 7 or 8 years, becoming the mother of two sons, Nausinoüs and Nausithoüs ...but that's another story (within the story).

***In the epic 3000 year old poem, The Odyssey, the Greek poet Homer recounts the ancient quest of the adventurer Odysseus to return home to his loving wife, Penelope. At every chance the gods throw up mighty obstacles to prevent him from getting home even as the Lady Circe gives him the advice he needs to survive. Yep, this is the same Circe who caused the Scylla Situation in the first place. Below, Odysseus himself tells of that first encounter with the dreaded Scylla and Charybdis.***

## **From Book XII**

Lady Circe spake unto me, saying:

... "On the other part are two rocks, whereof the one reaches with sharp peak to the wide heaven, and a dark cloud encompasses it; this never streams away, and there is no clear air about the peak neither in summer nor in harvest tide. No mortal man may scale it or set foot thereon, not though he had twenty hands and feet. For the rock is smooth, and sheer, as it were polished. And in the

midst of the cliff is a dim cave turned to Erebus, towards the place of darkness, whereby ye shall even steer your hollow ship, noble Odysseus. Not with an arrow from a bow might a man in his strength reach from his hollow ship into that deep cave. And therein dwelleth Scylla, yelping terribly. Her voice indeed is no greater than the voice of a new-born whelp, but a dreadful monster is she, nor would any look on her gladly, not if it were a god that met her. Verily she hath twelve feet all dangling down; and six necks exceeding long, and on each a hideous head, and therein three rows of teeth set thick and close, full of black death. Up to her middle is she sunk far down in the hollow cave, but forth she holds her heads from the dreadful gulf, and there she fishes, swooping round the rock, for dolphins or sea-dogs, or whatso greater beast she may anywhere take, whereof the deep-voiced Amphitrite feeds countless flocks. Thereby no sailors boast that they have fled scatheless ever with their ship, for with each head she carries off a man, whom she hath snatched from out the dark-prowed ship.

"But that other cliff, Odysseus, thou shalt note, lying lower, hard by the first: thou couldest send an arrow across. And thereon is a great fig-tree growing, in fullest leaf, and beneath it mighty Charybdis sucks down black water, for thrice a day she spouts it forth, and thrice a day she sucks it down in terrible wise. Never mayest thou be there when she sucks the water, for none might save thee then from thy bane, not even the Earth-Shaker! But take heed and swiftly drawing nigh to Scylla's rock drive the ship past, since of a truth it is far better to mourn six of thy company in the ship, than all in the selfsame hour."

"So I spake, and quickly they [the men] hearkened to my words. But of Scylla I told them nothing more, a bane none might deal with, lest haply my company should cease from rowing for fear, and hide them in the hold. In that same hour I suffered myself to forget the hard behest of Circe, in that she bade me in nowise be armed; but I did on my glorious harness and caught up two long lances in my hands, and went on the decking of the prow, for thence methought that Scylla of the rock would first be seen, who was to bring woe on my company. Yet could I not spy her anywhere, and my eyes waxed weary for gazing all about toward the darkness of the rock.

"Next we began to sail up the narrow strait lamenting. For on the one hand lay Scylla, and on the other mighty Charybdis in terrible wise sucked down the salt sea water. As often as she belched it forth, like a cauldron on a great fire she would seethe up through all her troubled deeps, and overhead the spray fell on the tops of either cliff. But oft as she gulped down the salt sea water, within she was all plain to see through her troubled deeps, and the rock around roared horribly and beneath the earth was manifest swart with sand, and pale fear gat hold on my men. Toward her, then, we looked fearing destruction; but Scylla meanwhile caught from out my hollow ship six of my company, the hardiest of their hands and the chief in might. And looking into the swift ship to find my men, even then I marked their feet and hands as they were lifted on high, and they cried aloud in their agony, and called me by my name for that last time of all. Even as when a fisher on some head-land lets down with a long rod his baits for a snare to the little fishes below, casting into the deep the horn of an ox of the homestead, and as he catches each flings it writhing ashore, so writhing were they borne upward to the cliff. And there she devoured them shrieking in her gates, they stretching forth their hands to me in the dread death-struggle. And the most pitiful thing was this that mine eyes have seen of all my travail in searching out the paths of the sea." *Excerpt from The Odyssey attributed to Homer (fl. 850 b.c.) The Harvard Classics, 1909-14.*