

wonderful for the time, their narration is more poetical than accurate; while, in comparison, the experience of common sense is long."\*

The sagas delight more or less in the improbable. The *Ynglinga* saga contains a description of King Jörund's custom of harrying the coasts of his neighbors. His son On pursued the same occupation. At the age of sixty the latter sacrificed his eldest son to Odin, who therefore extended his lease of life for another sixty years. He therefore sacrificed other sons, and for each son was granted ten more years of life, until he reached two hundred years, and would have offered up his remaining son had not his subjects interlered.

Accounts are also given of the *Bærsærk* (supposed to mean "bare-shirt," and called in Icelandic *Ulfrehdin*, or wolf-skin); a class of men who fought without armor, and wearing only a shirt of skins, or at times naked. They were of unusual physical development and savagery, and were liable to a state of excitement in which they displayed superhuman strength, and they spared neither friend nor foe. They could swallow fire, go through it naked and fling their bodies on the edges of weapons without injury. They would perform prodigies of valor, would roar and howl like savage beasts, were the pests of society, but were occasionally useful for deeds of blood. In the *Kristnisaga*, that narrates the introduction of Christianity into Iceland, it is stated that there were two *Bærsærks*, who were brothers, and who were unusually savage; would howl like wolves, run with bare feet through the fire, and pretended that swords could not cut them. Bishop Fredrik, who had come to Iceland from North Germany, was a very holy and sensible man. He blessed the fire and the sword, with the result that the *Bærsærks* were burnt like other people; and when they fell upon the points of the swords, to their surprise, they were killed like other people under similar circumstances. It is also related that King Olav sent Tangbrand from Norway to Iceland to extend Christianity in the latter country. He was challenged to a duel by a fierce *Bærsærk*, who made the usual boast that he could pass harmless through fire and no sword could pierce his skin. Tangbrand suggested that he make his word good. The *Bærsærk* fell on his sword, and to the astonishment of all it penetrated him and he died in consequence. This was owing to the fact that Tangbrand had made a cross on the sword, which interfered with the protection afforded by the devil.

It was taught that after an attack of frenzy the superhuman spirit left the *Bærsærk's* body, with the result that great exhaustion followed. In the *Eyrbyggjasaga*, an Icelander named Vernund obtained two *Bærsærks* of Swedish extraction, one called Halle and the other Leikner. They were larger and

---

\**Saga Times*, p. 16.