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# Christine: The Life and Death of a Danish - American Medical Missionary in the Middle East

by Jim Iversen

## Introduction.

Recent world events have spawned renewed interest in the people and history of the Middle Eastern country known as Iraq. For many centuries the people and territories of what was known as Mesopotamia were part of the Ottoman Empire, which was ruled by the Sultan of Constantinople from the city now called Istanbul. Iraq did not become a separate country until the Ottoman Empire ceased to exist shortly after the "Great War," eventually called the First World War. The history of the area is complicated, but Iraq became a country essentially because the Western Allies, that is, Great Britain, France, Italy and Russia were able to achieve most of their desires about the Middle East during the years following the end of the First World War in 1918. During the time that the Arabic-speaking people of the Arabian Peninsula were a part of the Ottoman Empire, they were ruled by the Turkish-speaking people in the northern part of the Empire. It wasn't until the years after the First World War that Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia became separate and independent states. Before the War started, however, the island of Bahrein and the area called Kuwait were already British protectorates, so the West had considerable influence in the region, and that influence increased after the First World War.<sup>1</sup>

Anna Kristine Iversen came into this world on the fourth of January, 1881 near the village of Slagballe on the Jutland peninsula in Denmark (about twenty-five kilometers northwest of Horsens). She was the oldest child of Stine and Peter Iversen, and was twelve years old when the family left Denmark and traveled to the United States to homestead in South Dakota.<sup>2</sup> My father, Alfred Iversen, was born on the homestead shortly after the family immigrated, and years later, he told me a little about his oldest sister Christine. Thus I vaguely knew that she had been a medical missionary to the Arabian Peninsula, but not much more. I also remembered a couple of visits

by a cousin Matthew who was quite a few years older than I, and who had the strange surname of Bennett—strange to me, at least, because all my other cousins had Danish surnames like Petersen, Hedegaard, Sandberg, Jorgensen and Bondo.

Many years later, while I was on a sabbatical leave working in Denmark in 1981, my family and I chanced to meet one of my father's first cousins, a remarkable man by the name of Mikkel Rasmus Mikkelsen. He was a retired schoolmaster living in Søvind, a small town located a few kilometers east of Horsens. He had met Christine when she visited Denmark in 1909 (he was fourteen years of age at the time), and I was the first relative from America to visit since that memorable occasion. Christine had written letters to his father and to him from the United States and from Arabia and he had managed to save a number of them. They were presented to me with the admonition that the letters, in turn, should be presented to Christine's son, Matthew Bennett, after our return to the United States. We visited Dr. and Mrs. Matthew Bennett at their home in Marquette, Michigan about a year later and I gave him the letters, as promised. He, in turn, had other materials about Christine and graciously offered me the opportunity to copy them.

The recent war in Iraq and subsequent occupation by the coalition forces once again turned my thoughts to Aunt Christine and thus this article was written. The primary reason for that connection is found in the following letter, written by one of Christine's fellow missionaries to Christine's mother in Marcus, Iowa, dated March 30, 1916:

*Basra, Persian Gulf via Bombay*

*Dear Mrs. Iverson*

*I know that you must all be very anxious for details about Christine's illness and death, the news of which will have reached you by cable through the Board of Missions in New York long before you receive this.*

*She died yesterday morning after an illness of only one week. She was at the British General Hospital and had all the care that nurses and doctors could give her...everything possible was done for her. The sickness*

seems to have been either typhoid or typhus, and she and Dr. Bennett contracted it while caring for the sick Turkish prisoners in our Mission hospital....Dr. Bennett became sick and after three days was moved to the Military Hospital...the last three nights before she was ill herself, Christine went down to the hospital and spent the night there, and I stayed with Matthew. Then on Tuesday, March 21, she was taken with the illness herself.

My husband made arrangements for her to be received at the British Military Hospital, although it is not usual for them to take a woman patient there.

She was buried in the English cemetery at Margil, about two miles up the river. We went up from the hospital in a large Red Cross launch, the coffin in the middle, covered with the American flag and some lovely flowers, a large white wreath and a spray. It looked beautiful. I wish you could have seen it. We, Christine's friends, were all in the launch, too, as it was a very large one. Sir Percy Cox and Lady Cox went, two of the military doctors, the head nurse, several officers who were special friends of the Bennetts, and a good many of the Englishmen who are old residents of Basra and whom we all know well.

My husband read the funeral service at the grave, and after the burial I put the flowers on the grave myself, taking a few from the wreath and the other bunch to send to you. I have never seen a more beautiful or impressive funeral.

With a whole heartful of sympathy for you all,

Yours very sincerely

(signed) Dorothy Firman Van Ess<sup>3</sup>

### **Life in South Dakota and Michigan.**

But what was Christine doing in Basra, in what is now the factious country of Iraq? There are clues in earlier accounts of her life, and in a letter she wrote to her family. While the family was still on the homestead in central South Dakota (1893 to 1895), Christine apparently attended school in Chamberlain, a town about thirty miles southwest of the homestead (or possibly in Gann Valley, three miles east of the homestead). About this period in her life she later wrote, *While there I read a book, "The Post of Honor", a tale of missionary life in Madagascar. It made a great impression on me, and I became fired*

with the ambition to become a missionary<sup>4</sup>. The family moved from the homestead in 1895 to a farm in southeast South Dakota, about ten miles west of Vermillion. The family became members of the Danish Trinity Lutheran Church, south of Gayville, and remained so until they moved to near Marcus, Iowa in 1902. In 1899, while attending Yankton College in Yankton, South Dakota, in a letter to her parents, Christine wrote: *I believe it is God's meaning and will that I should be a missionary...that will be many years yet. I can perhaps be a teacher here for a long while, but God leads me and when he calls I will follow. But I will not decide before I hear from you. When I made a decision before I was only a child, now I know what I am doing. I know if I make my own decision my life will be stronger and better, it will be easier to overcome temptation. But what do you think is best? Are you willing to surrender me to this work? Are you willing that I prepare myself for it? your daughter and sister, Christine Iversen.*<sup>5</sup> Her experiences with illness while she was in Yankton may have contributed to her decision to become a doctor of medicine as well a missionary.

Christine taught school near Irene, South Dakota, in order to earn enough money to enroll in medical school at the University of Michigan in 1903. One of her students was Helga Olsen Kjergaard, who stated (in 1986, when she was ninety-seven years of age) that she really liked Christine as a teacher. Helga was a student of hers for at least the school year 1898-99 in the Smith School, a one room country school, one mile east and one and half miles north of Irene. Christine was apparently at the college in Yankton off and on from perhaps as early as 1896 until she completed her studies there in 1902.<sup>6</sup>

"Christine was such an unusual child, even from when she was a baby," her mother was quoted as saying in an article published in 1933.<sup>7</sup> Others made similar observations. In an article in *Danskeren*, written shortly after Christine's death, it was noted that while she was teaching school at Irene, she participated in a debate society in Viborg, South Dakota,



*Christine, likely photographed in 1898 while she was teaching school in South Dakota*

and became acquainted with Pastor A. M. Andersen, the founder of Dana College and Trinity Seminary at Blair, Nebraska. Although still a young teenager, she apparently left quite an impression on Pastor Andersen and others at these debates.<sup>8</sup>

In 1903, Christine enrolled at the University of Michigan with the aid of references from two faculty members at Yankton College and a doctor in private practice in Yankton. According to one of the accounts of her life, she worked as a nurse during her first and second summer vacations from medical school. She also worked for members of the medical faculty and apparently made all of her own clothes in order to save money. "Prominent teachers in the university declared that no brighter young woman had ever been graduated from the medical department." She was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in recognition of her scholastic achievement.<sup>9</sup>



*Christine, left, and her sisters, Marie, Karen, and Katrine, photographed in Marcus, Iowa during the time Christine was a student at the University of Michigan medical school.*

After graduating with her M.D. degree in 1907 from the University of Michigan, she worked among the women in the state hospital for the insane at Kalamazoo, Michigan. She needed to pay off her debts for her education before she could present herself to "The Board of Foreign Missions, Reformed Church in America."<sup>10</sup>

### The trip to Denmark and the Middle East.

In letters to her Uncle Laurs Mikkelsen, who lived at Næsgaard, a farm at the west end of Salten Langsø in central Jutland, she discussed the differences in life in the USA and in Denmark. In February 1907, she told her uncle that she would like to go out as a missionary, and to visit Denmark on the way. She received her degree in June of that year. In July of 1909 she informed her Uncle Laurs that she would be visiting Denmark, coming about the first of October and staying a month. She stated that her mother was unhappy that she would be a missionary for the Reformed Church rather than the Lutheran Church. On the 8th of October she wrote a letter to Uncle Laurs from Horsens saying that she was next going to visit in Hvirring (a few kilometers west of Horsens), where she grew up before immigrating to the United States, and that she would arrive by train somewhere near to Næsgaard on the 20th of October. By her next letter from Horsens on the 10th of November, she stated that she has had the photographs developed from her trip to Næsgaard. She had also traveled to Copenhagen and to Aarhus and had visited Løvenholm, a castle north of Aarhus. According to a book by Dorothy Firman Van Ess, written many years later, Christine joined the rest of the missionary team in Trieste, Italy on the way to the Middle East. From Trieste they *voyaged down the Adriatic, across the Mediterranean, through the Suez Canal and down the Red Sea, and then crossed the Indian Ocean to Bombay.*<sup>11</sup> On the third of December she sent her uncle a card from Port Said, Egypt, on her way to the mission field on the island of Bahrein in the Persian gulf. In Bombay, her traveling companion Dorothy Firman later recalled, *we spent some days lodging pleasantly at the old Great Western Hotel, saw friends, explored the fascinating city, and did necessary shopping. Christine and I had never slept under mosquito nets before, and we discovered in the middle of our first night that we were both lying wide awake. So we got into one bed together and talked a great deal and slept very little....On the Gulf we steamed for several blue and gold days, stopping at ports on both sides, Arabian and Persian.*<sup>12</sup> The team of missionaries apparently arrived at Bahrein about the first of January, 1910. Christine and Dorothy were roommates in the first part of their stay in Bahrein.

## Life in the Middle East.

Christine was an expressive writer, both in Danish and in English. Following is a translation of part of her letter of March 28, 1910 to her Uncle Laurs:

*Yesterday, the Monday after Easter, which is an English holiday, we were invited out to tea by the English businessmen here, in one of the palm gardens a ways out of the city. We went out on donkeys, and sailed back by the sea in the evening. It was delightful out there among the trees and the palms. The lemon blossoms were so fragrant, and the day was still and delightful and not warm enough to be unpleasant.*

On October 14, 1910 she wrote a letter to her cousin Rasmus (Mikkel Rasmus Mikkelsen), Laurs' son, describing what he would see if he made the trip to the Middle East and then to Bahrein: *Approaching from the sea (the steamer from Bombay), one sees a low flat island, with palm trees, and the houses and the buildings which constitute the town Manama where I live. A little to the left is a very small island entirely covered by the town of the same name, namely Moharrak. The ship casts anchor about a mile from land, for there is no harbor. Some large boats with one sail appear, called "jollyboats" and they come to fetch the passengers and goods. Now the sailboat nears the shore, and here come the donkeys to fetch you, and soon you ride safely on the back of the donkey through the waves until finally you reach land. That is your first acquaintance with the small skillful Bahrein donkeys, but it will not be the last if you want to go anywhere. And you must have your "sunhats" on, even in the wintertime.*

*It is incredible how large a load the porters can carry on their heads. They have no uniforms, just dirty white rags. We do not have broad avenues here, they are closer to alleys. It is a little warm between the houses, and the smell is not always good, but you get used to it. Now we have come to an open plaza, and the large white building to the left is the English consulate, with the flag waving in the breeze. Nearby is the government hospital, which has a man from India as the doctor. In the foreground to the right are the church, the hospital and the mission house which is a large attractive place with palms and trees.*

*As we walk to the right, we see several large new houses built of stone, and we are near our gate which stands open. Please come in, I live in the middle apartment which has the broad stairway next to the front. It is a stately*



house, with broad porches and columns. They are not for show, however, but for protection from the sun.

Once you are comfortable, perhaps you would like to know how we keep house. Every family has a cook who works in the kitchen at the back of the house. And every cook likes to have a boy to run errands, fetch milk twice a day, and get the eggs and groceries. This same boy waves a fan over us when we dine to keep us cool. Another servant waits on the table, cleans the house, and washes the dishes. There is a waterbearer for the complex, who also serves the other apartment house and the hospital. He fills our water container upstairs and in the kitchen with well water (which is salty and not fit to drink, but can be used to wash and bathe) and carries out the dirty water. Our drinking water is brought on donkey back in goatskins from the square every day, which we have to purchase. It is brought to the square on camelback from the interior of the island. But this water is still contaminated and has to be boiled, filtered, and cooled in glass jars. Thus you see, our drinking water is precious and we must take care to be able to use it.

On February 10, 1910, she wrote to her youngest brother Alfred, informing him that she had written to their mother telling about her engagement to Dr. Arthur Bennett, a fellow medical missionary. Some historical accounts say that they met in Bahrein, while others indicate that she met him while in medical school in Michigan. The latter is perhaps correct, in view of the timing of the engagement. Again from Mrs. Van Ess' book: *During the second week of that fateful mission meeting (January, 1910), every afternoon after tea four young people went off to walk in the desert. Christine's partner was Dr. Arthur Bennett, a brilliant surgeon....*<sup>13</sup> In a later letter to Alfred, dated September 23, 1910, Christine describes her ring: *My engagement ring came this week, Dr. Bennett had it made for me in Bombay. He had the pearl for some time -- it is a beauty, about the size of a cherry pit, perfect in shape and a lovely color.*

Christine and Arthur were married September 11, 1911 in a Scotch Presbyterian Church in Simla, India. In a letter to Uncle Laurs, dated December 2, 1911, she writes: *We had a nice little wedding although far from friends and relatives. Two of our dearest friends among our fellow workers, Pastor and Mrs. Cantine, were with us. Then we had three weeks of delightful unforgettable days in the mountains of*

*India.* The letter was written on board the ship *Lindula*, on the way from Bahrein, to Basra, where they were to make a new home and to begin work at the Lansing Memorial Hospital in Basra, which had been built in 1910.

In a report to the Reformed Church in America, Christine wrote about the work in Bahrein and Basra.

*The Work at Bahrein.* *The Mason Memorial Hospital (built in 1902) is pleasantly situated, fronting on a garden which boasts, besides the datepalm and the ethyltree, several broad leafed shade trees, a considerable vegetable garden, and even a bed of nasturtiums and sweet peas. It is a joy to look upon, and rest to weary eyes. The hospital itself is a two-story building, shaded all around by deep verandahs. Downstairs the main rooms are the doctor's office, waiting and treatment rooms for men at the left of the front entrance, with similar rooms for the women at the right. Accessible from both is a special examination and treatment room, and conveniently situated for both is the common dispensary and drug room. Upstairs are found the operating and preparation rooms adjoining the large men's ward of ten beds on one side, and the women's ward of five beds on the other. Besides these two wards there is a smaller ward for men containing three beds, and one single room. In 1910 a two-roomed isolation ward was erected on a new plot adjoining the hospital compound at the back, with money given for the purpose by M. Victor Rosenthal, a pearl merchant from Paris.*

*The Work at Basra.* *Basra being a city of size as compared with the towns of Bahrein Island, and being under Turkish rule, the work there naturally presents certain differences and certain initial difficulties, such as requiring a Turkish diploma of the doctor, and, under present ruling, of the hospital dispensary. The field is large and the people wealthier, hence the receipts are much higher, making the work self-supporting. But at the same time it is true that there is greater competition, there being no less than five or six other physicians, carrying on work either independently or under government control. This necessitates maintaining a high standard of work, in order that the people may go to the Mission doctor and come under missionary influence.*

*The medical work at Basra has been carried on with marked success in spite of the fact that it has had no adequate accommodations until now. This is shown not only by the statistics of patients treated and operated on*

year by year, during the fifteen years of work, but by the fact that the intense prejudice which hedged in the work in its beginnings has been gradually broken down, so that the laying of the cornerstone of the Lansing Memorial Hospital in the spring of 1910 took on the aspect of a city function, with many officials present and a speech by the Wali (Governor) himself. Those concerned will remember the great difficulties attending the buying of land, how for years it was entirely impossible. And when finally land was obtained, to get permission to build the hospital involved endless red tape, even necessitating a trip to Constantinople by the doctor in charge. But the trade was finally gained, and at the public ceremony the men of prominence, all Moslems nominally, did not hesitate to acknowledge the good works of the Christian missionaries in their city.<sup>14</sup>

Christine was in charge of that part of the Lansing Hospital at Basra "which was reserved for women, while Dr. Arthur Bennett gave his chief attention to the men; but as husband and wife, it was possible for them to give their combined attention, in many cases, to both men and women. Moslem women in the hospital would sometimes permit the husband of their own doctor to treat them in the presence of his wife, but often there was objection to the presence of any man. In turn, the wife assisted her husband in many delicate operations on the patients who crowded the men's wards. Usually an American nurse was in residence at the hospital, while two Indian nurses, trained at Vellore, in India, gave their help almost exclusively to Mrs. Bennett. Two Arabian Christians compounded the drugs prescribed. Both doctors were well nigh overwhelmed with patients. The work for women was so successful that frequently Mrs. Bennett gave more treatments in a day than her husband; while she also devoted much time to bacteriological work on which she had specialized at the University of Michigan.

While Mrs. Bennett's professional skill attracted many of the women, her chief power was in her singularly attractive personality. One of the missionaries at Basra said, "Her sunny smile and bright, ready speech made her a delightful companion to all she met." Because of her wit and charm, she was in demand socially within and without the Mission circle. Yet she was an indefatigable worker, and was never satisfied with slipshod effort. Her success as a physician was due largely to her requirement that everything should be done thoroughly. This was a governing principle with her. In her study of the Arabic language she was so earnest that, when she

finally acquired it, the patients sometimes said that they could detect no foreign accent. She liked the Arabs, and they in turn liked her. She was a woman among women. She could mingle with the best Turkish and Arab women and could sympathize with the most lowly. No one was ever turned away, however tired Mrs. Bennett might be. The wife of a sheikh from far away, operated on in the hospital, called her "sister" and left a bracelet as an expression of her regard. Poor women would bring eggs, a basket of fruit, or a chicken....

Many women suffered from eye afflictions, and Christine found in this field alone large use for her surgical skills, and she would perform, unaided, several hundred eye operations in a year. Women sought advice from the beloved woman physician concerning delicate babies; others, suffering from tuberculosis, were told how to live so as to combat the disease most successfully. Patients with diseased bones, terrified at first at the suggestion of surgery, were won in time to confidence in the skill and tenderness of the woman doctor

Christine usually gave her afternoons to visiting in their homes women who were suffering from fever, tuberculosis, or other troubles. Sometimes she went to homes in whose large rooms a profusion of rich rugs and gold-embroidered pillows were a part of Oriental luxury.... Sometimes the afternoons were given entirely to visits among peasants of the adjacent country or to the uninviting homes of the poor people of the city.

Occasionally, both doctors would spend a few days with the Bedouins, the nomads of the desert country, living in their tents of sheep- or goat-skins, and traveling with their host as the Bedouins followed their herds to better grazing-lands or watering places.

### **[The Beginning of World War I]**

In the summer of 1914, both doctors had been called far up the Tigris, to Baghdad, to operate on the daughter of Nakib, the head of Mohammedanism in that city, a city which was soon to be defended sternly by the Turkish troops against the invading British forces. Nakib gave the two medical missionaries the use of his beautiful summer home on the banks of the Tigris, in the midst of orchards of oranges, apples, figs, grapes, and apricots. It was one of the finest places in Baghdad. Horses and servants were provided, and a carriage was sent every day to take the physicians to their patient.

The assassination of the Crown Prince of Serbia took place while Christine and Arthur were on their way back to Basra, and World War I had begun. Turkey entered the war in the autumn and the Moslem clerics declared a holy war. All the British subjects immediately left Basra. And it wasn't long before the Turks and the British had their first skirmish<sup>15</sup>. Christine kept a diary and her entries in November of 1914 have been preserved:

Nov. 1st. War is declared and Mr. Bullars the British Consul has been recalled. Mr. Van Ess and Dr. Bennett called on the governor today offering the Hospital and schools, for the Red Crescent service. He accepted the offers gladly and seemed pleased.

Nov. 3rd. Mr. Bullars was allowed to leave today but the remaining Britishers and the Russian Consul are detained as prisoners.

Nov. 4th. The S.S. Ekbatana on board of which we have been guests several times since its retention in Basra waters was dismantled today and sunk to block the way. We are deprived of all telegraphic news of the war in Europe, even the Turkish being no longer published.

Nov. 6th. All sorts of rumors abroad, among them reports of attacks on Fao and Abadan.

Nov. 8th. Our church service was disturbed this morning by crowds of huzzahing Arabs who fired off their guns now and then as they passed along the road. The religious fervor and frenzy into which they are working themselves make our native Christians tremble.

Nov. 9th. The green flag is out indeed and there are grave rumors of threatened massacre of Christians. Our helpers are moving as close together as possible with what accommodations we can offer. Two families are living in the Sunday School room at the chapel.

Nov. 10th. We are all wearing Red Crescent sleeve bands and the Hospital flies the flag. Our first wounded arrived early this afternoon...only four, but all bad cases; two officers and two marines from a little gun-boat which was sunk by a British shell. We are training our native Christians for service in the care of wounded.

Nov. 11th. Fanaticism is running high. One Jew killed, for good cause it is said, but this is doubtful. The mobs pass and re-pass our houses daily, with banners flying, shooting of guns, and loud rhythmic chants. Dr. Bennett has asked the governor for a police for the Hospital entrance and grounds. We feel reasonably safe as regards our helpers and their families.

Nov. 13th. Twenty wounded soldiers came in today, most of them able to walk. They are Turks, and we can obtain little or no news from them, but they seem to have been wounded in an engagement at Fao.

Nov. 14th. I have been busy today with the Christian women making mattresses and pillows. The capacity of the Hospital will be taxed to its utmost. The Red Crescent Society has funds and supplies which will help out where we come short.

Nov. 15. No music or singing in Church today so as not to attract attention to our services. Yesterday there were rumors of a big engagement to take place today, and at noon we could hear plainly the boom, boom of cannon from down the river. At tea time a wounded officer was brought in, who said the battle had been opposite Abadan.

Nov. 16. Yesterday evening after dinner the influx began. The first to arrive were two wounded Arabs accompanied by friends heavily armed. They were old friends and had come straight for the Hospital. They had no scruples against imparting news and told of a terrible battle which raged from morning till high noon, of ineffectual attempts to take a structure of steel and cement which the British had erected, and of a terrible carnage increased by the firing from the gun-boats. Also they spoke softly of finding the horsemen of Sheikh Mobarrek and Sheik Khussal arrayed against them on the side of the British.

While these were being dressed and made comfortable all hands were busy preparing places for those to follow. And soon they began to come, some limping or dragging tired feet, others carried in moaning on stretchers. The women's ward and the waiting room were made to accommodate over thirty by improvising beds on the long benches set two and two together. By that time every pillow, mattress, and coverlet in the Hospital was in use. The statements made by the Arabs were corroborated by others and facts added. Out of a battalion of eight hundred of Turkish troops only two hundred and fifty returned. Five hundred dead were left behind, and over two hundred and fifty wounded were being brought in. This did not include all the Arab wounded who would not necessarily come back with the troops. Just as we were ready to retire the telephone rang again. This time it was five officers, one or two badly wounded. I had to make a skirmish for pillows and blankets from our house and we finally made everyone comfortable for the night.

This morning the Hospital is a scene of hurry, disorder and tumult generally. The work of removing soiled and bloody clothing, of washing and cleaning injured limbs, of dressing wounds and soothing pain, of allaying hunger and thirst went steadily on. But more wounded were constantly brought in, and the lighter cases had to be sent elsewhere to make room. Crowds of people, men, women, and children, thronged the corridors looking for relatives or friends. When made to move on others took their places. Outside, if one stopped work long enough to look one saw these same people, in groups talking and gesticulating, or moving away, others who had just arrived, hurrying toward the entrances. I asked two quiet looking Arab women for whom they were looking, as I passed them in one of the wards. "My son, but hope he may be among the dead," she answered, evidently appalled at the suffering she saw. All day long we worked, and finally toward night some sort of order was obtained, and over seventy sick and wounded were sleeping beneath the roof of the Lansing Memorial Hospital.

Nov. 17. Our capacity has been increased to 90 by the use of corridors and offices. We had thought to have some leisure today for improving the arrangement and care of the patients, but instead had a repetition of yesterday's program. New cases continued to pour in, suffering dreadfully because they had not yet been cared for; they were the severely wounded who had been difficult to move. Transfers were made, the lighter cases sent away as before, for the hospital has undertaken to care mainly for the seriously wounded and those requiring operation. One poor gunner, black and besmeared from his work, was in a pitiful plight. A bullet hit him below the right eye, destroying the left and lodging in his brain and left him blind and deaf and speechless, and paralyzed in one arm and leg. He was still conscious as shown by his efforts to help in dressing him, but death mercifully put an end to his sufferings before the next morning's light.

The Montefic Chief Ajemie came to town with his Arabs amid great shoutings and salutes and flying of banners. Saled Talib Bey has gone over to the British and this man, his rival, has come to aid the government. The Arabs green flag is furled and fear of massacre is over for the present. When the Arabs realized that their Moslem brothers were fighting on the side of the British, they comprehended at last that this was a war not for religion, but between governments for supremacy and power.

Nov. 18. A number of freshly wounded today. News that the Turkish troops are in full retreat: Ottoman Bank has been ordered to Baghdad. A little before sunset troops in broken ranks moved by, seemingly tired and jaded. Arabs are ready to fly the white flag and hope for leniency from the British, because they say they were forced to fight. One of the officers in the Hospital, a fine fellow, who if he lives will come out of this trouble, minus a leg, wept in speaking of the defeat of his government. He confessed its inadequacy, and mentioned the fact that he with many others would owe his life to the presence of the Mission Hospital with its well-equipped operating room and trained helpers. After night-fall there were sounds from Ashar as of muffled drums beating and of many people marching, and until late at night boats blowing off steam in the river. People fleeing in the dark hours of the night perhaps, Turkish officials leaving with their families, or soldiers being withdrawn, we could only surmise the meaning of the commotion.

Nov. 19. I went to Basra on an urgent case, the first time I had been out in public for some time. A few days ago it would have been absolutely unsafe to appear in the public thoroughfare with a topee on; today people did stare much more than usual, but I suffered no inconvenience of any kind. We went by ballum as no carriages were running, the horses having been impressed into service by the government. The bazaars were closed and deserted, the streets nearly empty, and the few boats on the canal contained out-of-town Arabs rather than the usual townspeople, passing to and fro. As I was returning a squad of handsome Arab horsemen passed on the road, come, so our boatman informed me, from bringing good news to the governor, of the chief's Ajemie's prowess in his fight against the English today. Two hundred prisoners were supposed to have been taken, and an earlier report had it that he had seized two automobiles. The reports all day had been conflicting but toward evening reliable news came of the fall of Abd El Cassib, and while we sat at dinner one of the police came and begged a word with Dr. Bennett, the purport of which was that all wounded who could walk or travel comfortably were to be gotten ready to leave at once. He added in an undertone "The English are near". The motor cars taken turned out to be a dilapidated motorcycle and the two hundred prisoners dwindled to two Portuguese cyclists. As I sit here writing, the muffled sounds of last night permeate the air, the further exodus of Basra and Ashar. It is the third night of the new moon with a full high tide, the best possible time for the British Gun-boats to slip past the obstacles in the river



with the least expenditure of time and dynamite, and we all feel that tomorrow's light may find them in Basra waters. We wish that we might feel that there will be no fighting and bursting of shells that a quiet withdrawal of the troops from a place that they cannot possibly hold will happen, but we dare not hope for that.

Nov. 20. The Turks have evacuated Basra. All night long the road across the canal was busy; foot soldiers, cavalry, and artillery, retreating and leaving Basra. By morning word came that both the fort and city hall were both absolutely empty, that the Governor, commander-in-chief, and all officials had left. The soldiers too ill to move had been left in the government hospital and later were sent to us for care.

Panic reigned in Ashar, fear, not of the coming English, but of the Arabs who were accompanying them, or rather robber Arabs who would come no doubt on the heels of the Turks. The poor of the town turned robbers with the watchery, "Destroy all you can, get all you can, before the unbelievers come." Guns and ammunition had been left behind in the Arsenal in the haste of leaving, and these were soon in the hands of the populace which was by this time a robbing, house-breaking, mob. One Christian woman was said to have been killed in the streets by Arabs and robbed of her jewels and ornaments; all of our helpers who had homes to protect were absent from work, watching and waiting in fear and trembling.

A city without a government, without any central authority, is an appalling thing; an Arab city particularly. I have heard Arabs say that the Turkish government is "no government" but that seems not quite true, "no government" is worse. We kept expecting the British, but no British came. Turkish soldiers in larger and smaller numbers kept coming in from the desert; until their arrival no news of the evacuation had reached them apparently. Toward nightfall the native Christian families gathered, some at our house and some at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Van Ess, for mutual protection and comfort. We made a few preparations for repairing to the roof in case of need, and went to bed partly dressed, the men keeping watch alternately during the night. The women and children were huddled together in the office downstairs, preferring the uncomfortable closeness to being alone upstairs. And the shooting and looting went on with only occasional let-ups; we retired hoping that we would have no unpleasant interruptions until morning.

Nov. 21. Morning dawned with the shooting still frequent, but the grounds had not been entered or approached by anyone; and all our helpers sighed their relief and a prayer that today would surely bring the British. The Custom House was partly burned and completely looted during the night. Arab servants at the Hospital were demoralized either by fear or lust of plunder, and refused to work. Our boatmen failed to appear for one or the other of three reasons, and left us without our usual supply of water. A man died at the Hospital, and no one could be found to carry him to the burial-ground, or to bury him. All sorts of people passed and repassed with spoils of plunder shooting each other on any slight pretext. Across the canal one man was left dead, stabbed for the sake of three bars of soap. The warehouses of the Turkish River S.S. Co. furnished the source of plunder, and late in the afternoon was set on fire, using empty boxes as kindling wood.

It looked as if we must pass another night of tumult and terror, but just at sunset we heard with thankfulness and great relief, the report of cannon from the river. Immediately almost, the firing lessened, and in about two minutes ceased altogether; and when, after the light of day had left the sky, the search-light from the man-of-war gleamed in the heavens, all was magically quiet and peaceful. Order was restored after nearly forty-eight hours of panic and pandemonium let loose.

Nov. 22. Sunday morning again, but how different from the past two! We had a praise service in the church and our voices were raised in hymns of praise and thanksgiving. The Union Jack waves over the Custom House, and flags are flying everywhere. British soldiers are on patrol duty at the bridge and crossings, and are busy cleaning debris and waste in the Customs and warehouses. Two thousand troops have already come up on the Lynch river boats. The rest are advancing by land. There is much news to tell and more to hear, but there is still time for that. We rejoice above everything else in the thought that with the passing of Turkish rule a new era is dawning for Basra and Iraq.

(signed) Christine I. Bennett<sup>16</sup>

## **Conclusion.**

The fighting continued in the Middle East throughout 1915, and wounded Turkish soldiers continued to be brought into the hospital as prisoners of war. In January of 1916, soldiers who were ill of

typhoid, malaria, and typhus started to arrive. As indicated in the letter from Mrs. Van Ess, both Christine and her husband contracted the dread disease from the wounded prisoners, but she did not survive the illness.

The British Army was having a difficult time on the Arabian peninsula at that time but again quoting Mr. Franklin, *the most notable persons in charge of the campaign stopped their official work long enough to join the mission body and others in a funeral service. The service was in honor of the little Danish girl who dreamed of doing work for God and man; who, without ever faltering, struggled to prepare herself for service; who gave her life and love with beautiful generosity, and who fell at "The Post of Honor."*<sup>17</sup>

One who knew Mrs. Bennett well wrote to the Mission Board in New York the following: *She was one of the dearest women that ever went to a mission field, and her few short years of service were filled to overflowing with acts of love to all about her.*<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth de P. Cantine, who together with her husband had witnessed the Bennetts' wedding in India, wrote: *The sad news of the death, from typhoid fever, of Mrs. A.K. Bennett, of Basra, Arabia, will be a great shock to the readers of The Gleaner. Through her letters you have, doubtless, learned to know something of the strength and beauty of her character, of her earnest consecration and zeal, and will realize that the Arabian Mission has sustained a great loss. Those whose privilege it was to know her intimately will be better able to estimate how great is this loss, and how deep the sorrow that fills our hearts at the thought of missing from our ranks this devoted fellow worker whom we all loved so dearly and esteemed so highly. It is not often that so many rare and beautiful qualities are combined in one person as there were in Mrs. Bennett, and it makes it all the harder to lose her because she was so lovable. Her skill as a physician, her great love for her work and the people, and her earnestness in seeking to touch their hearts with the Gospel message made her an ideal missionary. And she was also an ideal working companion, bringing so much of love and happiness and good cheer into the lives of her fellow missionaries, as well as the inspiration of her daily devotion to duty and the genuineness of her Christian life. We shall miss her so much in every way. And when we think of the great work she was doing it seems as if we could not spare her, but God has willed it otherwise. Is there not some one who, following her example of consecrated*

*faithfulness, will take up this work of gentle loving ministrations to the women of Arabia?*<sup>19</sup>

Dorothy Van Ess, Christine's friend and companion, later wrote, *In March tragedy befell our mission. Our hospital had been caring for wounded -- and in March a contingent was sent to us, suffering from what proved to be typhus fever. This is highly infectious, and soon almost every member of our hospital staff succumbed to it. Miss Holzhauser, our Nursing superintendent, had it so severely that she was later invalided home to America, never to be able to return. Finally both Dr. and Mrs. Bennett came down with*



*Christine and Matthew shortly before her death in 1916*

*the dread disease...they were removed to the infectious section of Basra General Hospital....Christine Bennett had a short severe attack and in a few days died. The loss of the friend and companion whose life had been so close to mine was a deep sorrow. It was made all the more poignant because I had been taking care of three-year-old Matthew Bennett, and I had to tell him his mother was dead. When I came back from her funeral, I took him on my lap and told him that his mother was all well now, but that God had to take her to Heaven to make her so. He looked up at trustingly and said, "Isn't there a way down from there?" I explained as best I could, and he accepted it; and I knew that he had understood because he repeated it all so very sweetly in Arabic to an Arab Christian family, where I often sent him with his nurse to play with their children.*

*All Basra mourned with us. Arab women especially paid their tribute to Christine's selfless devotion in serving them and their children with her medical skill. Their grief was profound and sincere. The whole community was drawn together and to us in their sense of loss, and their appreciation of what the Mission hospital had contributed to the welfare of the people of Basra.*

*Dr. Bennett had a long sad convalescence and when he was able to travel he and Matthew left, also not to return.*<sup>20</sup>

Eventually Arthur Bennett established a medical practice in Marquette, Michigan. Matthew followed in his parents' footsteps,

graduating from the University of Michigan Medical School in 1937 and entering practice as a surgeon in Marquette. Matthew and his wife, Claire, who were married in 1941, raised four children, Christine, Matthew Jr., Stuart and George, and of course, now there are a number of grandchildren of the Drs. Arthur and Christine Bennett. Dr. Christine Iverson Bennett was a true heroine of her times. This Danish immigrant woman gave her love and her medical expertise to people in a strange land, and ultimately her life as still a young woman, in her service to others.

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<sup>1</sup> A good source of information about World War I and the formation of the countries of the Middle East is David Fromkin, *A Peace to End all Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914-1922* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1989).

<sup>2</sup> The story of the trip across the Atlantic and adventures in the new country was documented by Christine's younger sisters Karen and Kathrine and recounted in "Recollections of Two Immigrant Sisters," *The Bridge* 1988 11/1: 55-74. Many immigrant Danes changed the spelling of their names to conform to American usage. Thus "Kristine" became "Christine." Although Christine herself later Anglicized her surname to Iverson, the rest of the family eventually reverted to the Danish "Iversen." Christine's granddaughter, who is currently a professor at the University of Indiana in Bloomington, is Christine's namesake, i.e.: "Christine Iverson Bennett."

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Bennett allowed the author to make a copy of this letter in 1982.

<sup>4</sup> James H. Franklin, *Ministers of Mercy* (n.p. Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1919), pp. 31-50. Franklin's account was summarized on the Editor's Page of *Country Gentlemen*, October 18, 1919, 16.

<sup>5</sup> From a letter written by Christine to her parents and siblings (in Danish), dated November 5, 1899, from Dakin Hall, Yankton, South Dakota. She was then 18 years old. Records obtained from Yankton College (now closed) show that Christine attended as a special student in the years 1900-01, was a member of the freshman class in 1901-02, and finished a "classical and normal" program in June 1902. The letter written in 1899 indicates, however, that she was already in college in 1899. There is also evidence, via a Christmas card to her student, Helga Olsen, that she was already teaching school in Irene, South Dakota, in 1899 or earlier. The card states "To Helga Olsen, from her teacher, Christine Iverson, 1898-99."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>7</sup>Harold C. Jorgensen, "Christine Iversen Bennett," *The Ansgar Lutheran*, February 6, 1933, 6-11.

<sup>8</sup>Ivar Marcus Hansen, "Christine Iversen—In Memoriam," *Danskeren*, Lutheran Publishing House, Blair, Nebraska, ca. 1916 or 1917.

<sup>9</sup>Franklin, *Ministers of Mercy*, 31-50.

<sup>10</sup>Jorgensen, *The Ansgar Lutheran*, 6-11.

<sup>11</sup>Dorothy Van Ess, *Pioneers in the Arab World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*, p.14.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*.

<sup>14</sup>Christine Iversen, "The Medical Missions of the Reformed Church in America—Arabia," March 1911, 20 pp. Board of the Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church in America, 25 East 22d Street, New York.

<sup>15</sup>Franklin, *Ministers of Mercy*, pp. 31-50.

<sup>16</sup>Copy in possession of the author.

<sup>17</sup>Franklin, *Ministers of Mercy*, pp. 31-50

<sup>18</sup>*The Mission Gleaner*, May 1916, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid*.

<sup>20</sup>Van Ess, *Pioneers in the Arab World*, pp. 95-96.