

Syrian attitudes to disfigurement were different from those here. Which made Georgette Harvey, 65, even more determined to help her niece Mirelle

Read me a story, Auntie! pleaded my nephew. The son of my brother George, Henry was the apple of my eye. I was from a Christian family in Syria, where extended families often live together, and every day I'd watch Henry play with his cousins in the shade of our courtyard. Two of my brothers moved to Britain and, in 1973, I came here for a six-month visit. I met a young British man and returned to marry him and settle in Essex. We had two daughters, Natalie, now 34, and Charlotte, 31, although sadly, our marriage didn't work out.

I now lived thousands of miles away from my extended family, but we kept in close contact. Over the years, whenever there was news, they were straight on the phone. One day it was Henry's turn to call. 'I'm getting married, Auntie!' He'd become a jeweller and his bride, Rima, was a schoolteacher. Soon they started a family — two girls, born one year apart. In 1999 I visited Syria with my daughters. I couldn't wait to meet Henry's wife and two children. 'Where's the little one?' I asked. The oldest, Christell, was there, pretty as a picture. But not Mirelle, who was three years old. 'Er, she's unwell,' said Henry, looking uncomfortable. The next time I saw him there was another excuse. Finally I asked



People said she was cursed

what was going on. Henry's eyes welled with tears as he explained. 'There's something wrong with Mirelle,' he told me. 'She looked perfect when she was newborn, except for a tiny red blotch on her face. But after about a month, the spot turned bright scarlet and started growing.' 'Bring her to me,' I pleaded. 'So they did. And I must admit, on first seeing her, I was shocked. Lumpy red marks covered half her face. One side of her neck was swollen underneath the skin. Yet she had the most beautiful big brown eyes I'd ever seen. I held Mirelle in my arms and my heart

melted. Surely something could be done for this poor, innocent child. But medical care in Syria is less advanced than in Britain. Over the next two years Mirelle was seen by several doctors, but nobody could make a diagnosis or offer any treatment. Finally, Henry rang me. 'We're desperate, Auntie,' he said. 'We've asked everybody we can think of. Nobody knows what the problem is, or if there is any treatment. Please, please can you help us?' I didn't know what to say. I was a pensioner in Essex, half a world away. What could I do that would make a difference for Mirelle? But I heard the anguish in my nephew's voice and couldn't crush his last hope. 'I'll think about it,' I said. 'A few days later I went to my GP with photographs of Mirelle. She sent them to a colleague. Several weeks later, I received a telephone call from a specialist surgeon, Mr Mark Gittos. 'Your niece appears to have a benign growth called a capillary haemangioma,' he told me. 'Unfortunately it is very large. Often they shrink and disappear after a few years. But I'm not confident that will happen in this case.' Mr Gittos said Mirelle could benefit from surgery and laser treatment. But because she was not from the UK, it would cost thousands of pounds. I was a retired seamstress — I didn't have that sort of money. Mirelle's parents had just lost their jobs and were struggling. I phoned every charity I could find, but no



Left: Mirelle as a perfect newborn. Below: Mirelle with her parents and sister



Below: Mirelle, Charlotte, Rima, Christell and me in London, 2003



Above: me and my brother George. Right: me with George's son, my nephew Henry

one could offer me any help. At the last charity, a lady asked if I'd thought about fundraising myself. 'You could start small — perhaps with a coffee morning,' she said. She got me thinking. I phoned Henry and told him I was going to give it a try. I invited my friends round and showed them Mirelle's picture, then asked if they had any suggestions or raising funds. My friend Rosemary said: 'I'll make some soup, invite everyone to know to lunch and sell tickets. Georgie, you can give a talk about Mirelle and ask for donations.' On the day of the lunch, I was so nervous as I stood up and began to speak. 'Mirelle is five years old. She is very intelligent. She should be at school. But local schools won't take her, for fear her disfigurement is catching. People in the street stare and say she is cursed. Her mother Rima teaches her at home. It's so sad when her condition is treatable in Britain. But her parents can't afford the air fares, let alone medical fees.' Rosemary's party raised £90. Soon other people started making suggestions. 'Let's make a quilt to raffle.' 'We could organise a country dance evening.'

My local newspaper, the Brentwood Gazette, carried Mirelle's story, and offers of help arrived. A nearby school, St John Payne RC school, held several events and raised a whopping £3100. Local churches also got involved. My adopted hometown had taken little girl from Syria to its heart — with amazing results! Within a year we'd raised enough to bring Henry and Mirelle to Britain. In March 2001, she was seen by Mr Gittos and colleagues at roomfield Hospital, Chelmsford. Henry said she should return in a few years, when she might be old enough to have laser treatment to remove the red marks on her face. While she was here, Mirelle visited McDonald's for the first time — a simple pleasure, it's true, but the sort of thing that was denied to her at home, where she spent most



Left: Mirelle at seven years old, before laser treatment. Centre: aged 11, after surgery. Top right: on her latest trip to Essex in 2010. Right: meeting Natalie and baby Thomas

of her time indoors. 'I love Essex,' she told me. 'The people here are so kind.' We also saw experts who showed Henry how to apply camouflage make-up to his daughter's face. A few weeks after they returned to Syria, Henry phoned me. 'There has been a big change in Mirelle. She's much more confident. And with the make-up, she looks better, so a local school has agreed to take her as a pupil.' I was thrilled. But I knew there was a long way to go. In August 2003, aged eight, Mirelle came back to Britain with her mum Rima and sister Christell. Surgeon Mr Loshan Kangesu performed an operation to reduce the size of her lower lip, which was swollen and distorted. Other doctors tried laser treatment on two small patches on her face, but the red lumps were much too thick. They suggested she return at puberty, by which time the growths should have thinned. As time passed, her appearance did start to improve by itself, as Mr Gittos had said it might. The swelling underneath her chin subsided and the growths on her face became

flatter, less angry. But she still had loose skin and ugly, scaly lesions across one side of her face. When Mirelle had to change from primary to secondary school, it was traumatic for her. 'At my old school I had friends,' she told me. 'People were used to me, they didn't stare. But in my new school everyone looks and whispers and it's horrible, Auntie. When are these nasty things on my face going to go away?' 'Be strong and don't worry about what other people think,' I said. But for a teenage girl, that's very hard. In September 2010, laser treatment began in earnest at Broomfield Hospital.

Afterwards Mirelle's face was red and blistered, but as it heals, fresh new skin should emerge. This time, while she stayed with me in Browne Close, Brentwood, Essex, she became addicted to charity shopping. She also met Natalie's son, Thomas, then 20 months old. It broke my heart to see how she worried before they were introduced. 'Will Thomas be frightened

'I love Essex,' said Mirelle. 'The people are so kind'



Below: Mirelle, Charlotte, Rima, Christell and me in London, 2003



of me, Auntie, when he sees me?' 'Of course not! He'll love you!' I said. And he did, as will Natalie's new baby Charlotte, born in January. Mirelle is 15 now. She's a sweet, uncomplaining girl who only wants one thing — to be like everybody else. We're trying to organise plastic surgery for her and she's looking forward to seeing more improvement after that. 'The Mirelle Sabbagh Surgery Fund has raised over £12,000 so far — something I never would have believed when I gave that speech at Rosemary's soup party. I couldn't have done it without the people of Essex. Their support and kindness have given a young girl so much hope.



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Our brave Mirelle now, with Rima (far left) and me

Edited by Tracy Gayton and Wicky Honour. Photos: Brian Aldrich