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# A WREATH FOR BLAIR

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*“The curious incident is the barking of the dog,” Sherlock Holmes remarked.*

*“But the dog did not bark!” exclaimed Dr. Watson.*

*“That is the curious incident!”*

**T**his week’s curious incident concerns the wreath of Tony Blair. The wreath that he did not lay on the grave of Yasser Arafat. Elementary, dear Watson. Blair did go to the graveside. But he omitted the natural and customary thing: laying a wreath. Neither did he bow. He just tilted his head a few centimeters and hastened to get away.

In my imagination, I can hear the frantic consultations before the event. Blair’s advisors are discussing it: To lay a wreath? No, no, that will make President Bush angry. To bow? Ariel Sharon won’t like it. To tilt the head? Alright. That should satisfy the ... Palestinians.

But how much? Ten centimeters? Too much. Two? Not enough. Five, then? That should do it.

I see Blair practicing in front of a mirror. And, indeed, he did it exactly as planned. To the millimeter.

I had stood at the same place 24 hours earlier, on the 40th day of mourning, a day of special significance in Muslim tradition. The leaders of the Palestinian authority and foreign representatives, including those of the President of Egypt and the King of Jordan, congregated in the hall of the Mukata’ah, tens of thousands thronged the courtyard. A group of Gush Shalom activists, the sole Israeli delegation present, were seated in reserved places. After the speeches, we went to pay our respects at the grave, which was piled with wreaths. The Palestinians walked past, stood in silence for a few minutes, prayed. Many eyes were moist. This is now the central national shrine of the Palestinian people, right after the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

“Every Palestinian loves Arafat,” a young man standing there told me, “And each one loves him in his own way.”

Blair must have thought that he was doing the Palestinians a great favor by going to the grave at all. But his behavior, that of a person fulfilling an unpleasant duty, was a terrible mistake. In Arab civilization, gestures are more important than words. Not laying a wreath was an insult to the father of the Palestinian nation. After all, compared to Arafat, what is Blair but a political dwarf? =

Why did he come at all?

There is much talk of a “window of opportunity” in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The world’s political celebrities - from Blair to Italy’s ex-fascist foreign minister - are swooping down, like birds of prey, to snatch a piece of the peacemaker’s glory. It looks rather repulsive, and quite ridiculous, too, because there is no window and no opportunity, not as long as Sharon is in power.

Blair had reasons of his own for the visit. He dragged the UK into the Iraq war, in spite of the opposition of a great many of his compatriots. As clearly foreseen by many, the war has turned into a disaster, which is getting worse by the hour. So why not jump on the Palestinian horse in order to divert attention from the Iraqi debacle? And, to prove that he is not Bush’s Poodle, he wants to show that he can develop an independent initiative and drag Bush behind him, for a change.

That’s how the idea was born: A big international peace conference will convene in London, and peace between Israel and Palestine will emerge. A dizzying success. Britain restored to her former glory. The Nobel Peace Prize for Blair assured.

But when he hurried over to Sharon, a cold shower awaited him. Sharon is sure of himself, he is much closer to Bush than Blair will ever be. When Blair proposed the peace conference, Sharon told him, in so many words, “shove it you-know-where.”

Blair leapt off the horse as quickly as he had mounted it. Peace is Out. Must not be mentioned. There will be just a conference, without peace. Israel will not even go.

So what is it for? To teach the Palestinians how to be deserving of peace. How to fight terrorism, how to make democracy, how to institute reforms. Britain, which just now is infested with sex and bribery scandals, will teach the Palestinians how to behave.

Blair also tried to float the balloon of an Israeli-Syrian peace, but he gave that up quickly, too. Bush does not want Israeli-Syrian peace, and Sharon likes the idea even less. Bush wants to keep open the option of attacking Syria, once the Iraqi mess calms down (he still entertains that hope). Sharon, for his part, has no interest at all in a peace that would entail dismantling settlements and giving back the Golan. God forbid!

So that leaves only Palestinian. Standing next to the massive Sharon and beaming with admiration, Blair declared that there can be no peace process until the Palestinians put an end to terrorism. In free translation: Until the armed opposition to occupation stops, there can be no talk about ending the occupation. Since no

Palestinian leadership could possibly “liquidate terrorism” without any prospect of ending the occupation and achieving peace, this means, simply: No peace process.

Until 44 days ago, there was a convenient pretext: Yasser Arafat is the obstacle to peace. Now, with Arafat no longer around, Sharon has fallen back on the other pretext: First of all, the Palestinians must liquidate terrorism. Meaning: when the lamb lies down with the wolf. Blair accepted this enthusiastically.

With this load he arrived in Ramallah, in order to offer Abu Mazen the London No-Peace Conference as a means for the education of the Palestinian people. Blair believes, so it seems, that in their desperate situation the Palestinians would clutch at a Straw.

The anger Blair aroused among the Palestinians was expressed the next day by Prime Minister Abu Ala’, who attacked the initiative sharply. But the Palestinian leadership cannot afford to refuse the invitation to the conference, especially if it is backed by Bush. So there will be another sterile conference, number 101. (But who is counting?)

I hope that Abu Mazen will not lay a wreath in London. Let him journey to Churchill’s grave and tilt his head, five centimeters exactly.





**AVNERY | SHARON'S SKIN AND BUSH'S SPOTS**