2810: To the Editor of the New Statesman

[October 1933]

Sir,

Everybody will sympathise with Mr St John Ervine in his courageous protest last week at the Institute of Journalists against the methods of publicity employed by a certain section of the press. The instances he gave were harrowing enough; Lady Ellerman's account of what she suffered at the hands of photographers when her husband died is still fresh in our minds; and most of us can supplement such stories with cases of a less extreme kind which have come under our own observation. Engaged couples of the upper classes complain that the telephone never ceases to ring until they have agreed to be photographed; the click of the camera is heard behind the altar rails during the marriage service; and at the other end of the social scale a village woman is besieged in her cottage by reporters and photographers because the rumour has reached Fleet Street that the wife of a gardener has received a legacy. The tale is endless.

But are we not ourselves to blame? Open the dailies and the weeklies. Among the pictures of Atlantic flyers and murderers you will find portraits

1. It was not a sudden single disaster, but an accumulation of worries about the Hogarth Press, Quentin's illness, lack of time to write, the pump at Rodmell and Leonard's influenza.

of well-known people, and by no means all of them are public people, but private people, musicians, writers, painters, artists of all kinds. Their homes are photographed, their families, their gardens, their studios, their bedrooms and their writing tables. Interviews appear; their opinions on every sort of subject are broadcast. How, then, can we blame the press if it takes advantage of this disposition on the part of well-known people, and infers that on the whole publicity is desired?

Yet this is by no means always the case. If you ask these "celebrities" why they have consented to make their faces or their houses or their views public property they will reply, for the most part, that they have done so unwillingly, but that unless they consent they will be branded as prigs, curmudgeons or cranks. Often, they will add, the request is made by friends whom it is difficult to refuse, or by struggling journalists in urgent need of the few guineas that the interview or the portrait will procure them. In short, a mild form of blackmail is applied, and out of weariness or good nature they succumb. Few are so simple or so modest as to suppose that any compliment is implied, and nobody nowadays believes that a publicity which is so widespread and indiscriminate has any pecuniary or prestige value for the victim.

Surely now the time has come when it is not enough to protest and to sympathise and to succumb. What is needed is a Society, with funds, with an office and some high-sounding title—Society for the Protection of Privacy or the like—to which those who honestly abominate such practices could belong. It is unnecessary to point out how sublime and authoritative sentiments that sound merely priggish when they are spoken by private people appear when issued with the sanction of an institute. A badge might be worn. A pledge might be administered. Members of the literary profession, for example, might take an oath not to allow any photograph, drawing or caricature of themselves to appear in the papers with [*sic*] their consent; not to give interviews; not to give autographs; not to attend public dinners; not to speak in public; not to see unknown admirers provided with letters of introduction from friends—and so, and so on. The form of the oath could be varied according to the profession. Any surplus funds could be applied to the abolition of steel traps or to the protection of wild animals. Your readers doubtless will be able to amplify and improve these suggestions. But until some society of the sort is founded and supported we have no right to complain if the press assumes that publicity is sweet, and snaps us while we are being born, married and lowered into the grave. As a pledge of good faith, may I add that I am willing to take the above oath myself, and to contribute not less than five guineas annually to any society that will rid us of these pests?

Virginia Woolf

New Statesman, 28 *October* 1933