

William Strunk, Jr.

July 1, 1869 — September 26, 1946

William Strunk, Jr., was born in Cincinnati on July 1, 1869, the son of William and Ella Garretson Strunk. He took his A. B. at the University of Cincinnati in 1890, his Ph.D. at Cornell in 1896. He studied at the University of Paris, 1898-99. He married Olivia Emilie Locke in 1906; three children survive. He began his teaching career as instructor in mathematics at Rose Polytechnic Institute, Terre Haute, Indiana. In 1891 he came to Cornell, and here remained, in effect, for the rest of his life. Appointed Assistant Professor of English in 1899, he became Professor in 1909 and Professor Emeritus in 1937. He was the author of *Elements of Style* (1918), and *English Metres* (1923), and was the editor of various texts. The decoration of Officier d'Academie (France) was awarded him. In 1935-36 he was literary consultant in the screen production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Attracted to the study of letters by his innate love of the word and of creative thought, he gave his life to the communication of beauty and wisdom. Disdaining specialization, he ranged over many fields of knowledge. He began as a teacher of mathematics; he was at home in the classic and foreign literatures and cultures. Though his scholarship was exact and extensive, though his effervescent curiosity led him into endless explorations of curious and knotty problems, he maintained in word and practice that the end of the literary scholar is not to solve problems but to lighten the environing darkness. His year in Hollywood was, in a way, a suitable crown for his career. In the supervision of an admirable motion picture, *Romeo and Juliet*, he helped to present his beloved Shakespeare to an audience of millions. He found the creative purpose of Hollywood a stimulation and a delight, there is evidence that Professor Strunk, typed as The Professor, was a stimulation and a delight to Hollywood.

A photograph in the office of the Department of English recalls Professor Strunk in a pose familiar to many generations of Cornellians. He sits in an easy chair, absorbed in a wide book opened on his knees. The book rests on another book, from which protrudes an array of marking slips. Beside him, on the desk, stands a pile of volumes, of the forbidding format reserved for scholarly works. He is verifying some obscure quotation; he is settling some quaint dispute proposed by a time-pinching colleague. He is happy in this pursuit of this bit of knowledge, trifling, perhaps, but he maintained with Dr. Johnson that no bit of knowledge is so trifling that he would rather know it than not know it. With such a habit of mind, he became a well of information, a mine of reference. He was, however, preserved from the dangers of omniscience by his unfailing sense of proportion, his deep humor, and his philosophy—in the old meaning of philosophy: the love of wisdom.

So formed and shaped, Professor Strunk was for a good half century on this campus an exemplar of the humane scholarly life. The benign quality of his mind showed forth in all his dealings. When his old students and his old companions gather, their talk is all of his kindness, his helpfulness as teacher and colleague, his boyish lack of envy and guile. And so his serene spirit lives on, in that of Cornellians of fifty years.

Morris Bishop, A. M. Drummond, F. C. Prescott