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Former Notre Dame President On "Traditions"--I.

One day the late Father John Cavanaugh, former President of Notre Dame, was asked by a student to "suggest some traditions to start." The request got under the skin of the brilliant and mature ex-President.

"Why, Son," he answered, "traditions are never 'started'. They exist and grow long before anyone discovers them. They exhale from any distinctive group-life as naturally and inevitably as perfume exhales from a violet. They are the fragrance of life and can no more be created than a new star. The old songs sung by generations of happy students without any thought of 'starting a tradition'; the old jokes--the marble champion, the fake athletic captain, pew rent and water rent--the old stories about Brother 'Bony' and Brother Hugh's 'hawses' and Rockefeller Hall and the dead Caesar in Washington Hall; the old atmosphere, the old dreams and enthusiasms, the old 'razzes,' the old thrilling stunts handed down by word of mouth, the sturdy old contempt for 'snitching' or for smelling at another man's heels, the old scorn of unclean speech or cheating or stealing or unfair self-seeking, these things are such stuff as dreams and traditions are made of. Like epic poems these things are never 'started' or 'made'; they grow. They are the cream skimmed off the rich milk of the college mind."



"That's certainly interesting, Father," interrupted the somewhat chastened student, "but I've always had the idea that traditions make a slave of a fellow."

"On the contrary," continued the old President with enthusiasm, "traditions claim and receive the plenary loyalty of all high and fine spirits. 'Our Fathers Have Told Us' is a slogan of all reverential--that is to say, the best--minds. It is almost a touchstone of refinement in a mind to be mindful of the cave from which he was dug and the rock from which he was hewn."

"Perhaps we elders are to blame for not indoctrinating freshmen more zealously in Notre Dame traditions--for not telling them that Sorin and Granger at one time possessed only one hat between them (poverty!) so that when one was seen abroad on the campus the other was known to be, for most excellent reasons, at home; that once the students must have gone supperless to bed had not the arrival of an unexpected gift from a friend relieved their distress; that while the foundations of our resplendent art traditions were being laid by the purchase of pictures many years ago the horses were once actually unyoked from the plow to be sold for debt."

"Perhaps we ought to recall more often the old missionary days when after long journeys in sub-zero weather the priest had to be lifted out of the sled and his feet thawed back to life; when teaching brothers returning from a hard year's work in the mission schools walked forthwith into the harvest field to garner wheat against the next morning's bread; when in the old Argonaut days of the 'foolish forties' three grave and reverend brothers set out pathetically for the gold fields of California in the desperate hope of gathering enough bullion to lift the college debt. They got no gold, the splendid heroes, but they were willing to do that terrible thing--to leave the peace and safety and refinement of their monastic shades--to endure not only the privations and perils of the Argonauts but (worse still, sometimes!) to endure the Argonauts themselves--in order to save our Alma Mater from the auctioneer. No, they found no nuggets of gold, but they left after them golden memories."