I met Richards ten years or more ago when I first went down to Cuba. He was a short, sharp-faced, agreeable chap, then about twenty-two. He introduced himself to me on the boat and I was surprised to find that Panamerica Steel and Structure was sending us both to the same job. Richards was from some not very good state university engineering school. Being the same age myself, and just out of “tech,” I was prepared to patronize him if I needed to; but I soon saw I didn’t need to. There was really not the faintest possibility of anyone supposing that Richards was as smart as I was. In fact, I couldn’t then imagine how he had managed to get his job. I have an idea now. It came to me when I happened to read a few weeks ago that Richards had been made a vice-pres ident and director of Panamerica Steel when the Prossert interests bought the old firm. Richards was naturally likeable and I liked him a lot, once I was sure that he wasn’t going to outshine me. The firm had a contract for the construction of a private railroad, about seventeen miles of it, to give United Sugar a sea terminal at a small deep-water Caribbean port. For Richards and me it was mostly an easy job of inspections and routine paper work. At least it was easy for me. It was harder for Richards, because he didn’t appear ever to have mastered the use of a slide rule. When he asked me to check his figures I found it was no mere for mality. “Boy,” I was at last obliged to say, “you are un doubtedly the dumbest white man in this province. If you are enterprising, Farrell will see you never get another job down here.” Richards grinned and said, “I never want another one. Not a job like this, anyway. I’m the executive type. “Oh, you are!” “Sure, I am. And what do I care what Farrell thinks? What can he do for me?” “Plenty. If he thinks you’re any good, he can see you get something that pays money.” “He doesn’t know anything that pays money, my son.” “He knows things that would pay enough for me,” I answered, annoyed. “Oh,” said Richards, “if that’s all you want, when Farrell’s working for me I’ll make him give you a job. A good one.” “Go to the devil!” I said. I was still checking his trial figures. “Look, stupid,” I said, “didn’t you ever take arithmetic? How much are seven times thirteen?” “Work that out,” Richards said, “and let me have a report tomorrow.” When I had time, I continued to check his figures for him, and Farrell only caught him in a bad mistake about twice; but Farrell was the best man Panamerica Steel had. He’d been managing construction jobs both in Cuba and Mexico for twenty years. After the first month or so he simply let Richards alone and devoted himself to giving me the whole benefit of his usually sharp and scornful criticism. He was at me every minute he could spare, telling me to forget this or that and use my head, showing me little tricks of figuring and method. He said it would be a good plan to take some Spanish lessons from a clerk he named in the sugar company’s office. “Spanish?” said Richards, when I told him he’d better join the class. “Not for me! Say, it took me twenty-two years to learn English. People who want to talk to me have to know it, or they’d better bring an interpreter with them.” “All right,” I said, “I don’t mind telling you the idea is Farrell’s. He spoke to me about it.” “Well, he didn’t speak to me,” said Richards. “I guess he thinks I’m perfect the way I am. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a date with a beer bottle.” I could easily see that he was coming to no good end. In January several directors of the United Sugar Com pany came down on their annual meeting – nominally business, but mostly pleasure; a good excuse to get south on a vacation. They came on a yacht. The yacht belonged to Mr. Joseph Prossert, who was, I think, chairman of United Sugar’s board then. He was an inconspicuous, rather stout man, with little hair on his head. He was dressed in some dark thin cloth. His interest in sugar was purely-financial–he didn’t know anything about it from the practical standpoint, I really saw him quite close when he was delayed on his boat when the directors went on a tour of inspection and Farrell left Richards and me and two or three armed guards to come up that afternoon. Mr. Prossert was very affable. He asked me a number of questions. I knew the job well enough and could have answered almost any intelligent question –I mean, the sort that a trained engineer would be likely to ask. As it was, I suppose I’d said for perhaps the third time, “I’m afraid I wouldn’t know, sir. We haven’t any calcu lations on that,” getting a glance of mildly surprised disbelief, when Richards suddenly spoke up. “I think, about nine million cubic feet, sir,” he said. He looked boyishly embarrassed. “I just happened to be working it out last night. Just for my own interest, that is. Not officially.” He blushed. “Oh,” said Mr. Prossert, turning in his seat and giving him a sharp look. “That’s very interesting, Mr.–er– Ri chards, isn’t it? Well, now, maybe you could tell me about–” Richards could. He knew everything. He knew to the last car the capacity of every switch and yard; he knew the load limits of every bridge and culvert; he knew the average rainfall for the last twenty years; he knew the population of the various villages we passed through; he knew the heights of the distant blue peaks to the west. He had made himself familiar with local labor costs and wage scales. He had the statistics on ac cidents and unavoidable delays. All the way up Mr. Pros sert fired questions at him and he fired answers right back. When we reached the railhead, a motor was waiting to take Mr. Prossert on. Getting out of the gas car, he nod ded absent-mindedly to me, shook hands with Richards. “Very interesting indeed,” he said. “Very interest ing indeed, Mr. Richards. Good-by and thank you.” “Not at all, sir,” Richards said. “Glad if I could be of service to you.” As soon as the motor moved off, I exploded. “Of all the asinine tricks! A little honest bluff doesn’t hurt; but some of your figures–” “I aim to please,” Richards said, grinning. “If a man like Prossert wants to know something, who am I to hold out on him?” “I suppose you think you’re smart,” I told him. “What’s he going to think when he looks up the figures or asks somebody who does know?” “Listen, my son,” said Richards kindly. “He wasn’t asking for any information he was going to use. He doesn’t want to know those figures. If he ever does, he has plenty of people to get him the right ones. He won’t re member these. I don’t even remember them myself. What he is going to remember is you and me.” “Oh, yes?” “Oh, yes,” said Richards firmly. “He’s going to remem ber that Panamerica Steel and Structure has a bright young man named Richards who could tell him everything he wanted to know when he wanted to know it–just the sort of chap he can use; not like that other fellow who took no interest in his job, couldn’t answer the simplest question, and who’s going to be doing small-time con tracting all his life.” “Oh, yes?” I said. But it is true that I am still working for the Company, still doing a little work in the construction line