

Jason = Summers

JASON. (*Again to audience.*) Sorry about this delay, but authors are temperamental, too, the same as actors and everyone else connected with the creative arts. As I was saying, look at these five people, ladies and gentlemen. (*He gestures and turns to them. They are all glaring at him.*) What do you see? Genius! That's what you see. Five brains which have been dedicated to murder.

JESS. Don't tempt us.

JASON. (*Ignores this.*) WMT Studios has brought together, at great expense, these five minds to collaborate and become one, to bring you the great mystery series of all time, what we hope will be television's finest hour. Now, let me introduce them to you—the faces behind the book jackets, as it were. (*He has a forced laugh.*)

RODNEY. (*To MILDRED as JASON shuffles his file notes.*) Does he write his own material?

JASON. Jessica and Whitney Olive, authors of over thirty best sellers, former joint presidents of the Crime Writers' League, and the darlings of International Society. (*JESS and WHIT rise and face front. They bow.*) You may applaud, if you wish. (*Applauds and hopefully the audience picks it up.*)

WHIT. (*Toasts with martini.*) Thank you.

JESS. (*With a glare at JASON.*) I can't tell you how I feel being here. (*Gives a rather hollow smile to the audience.*)

JASON. Thank you. (*WHIT and JESS sit again.*) Mildred Z. Maxwell, specialist in the surprise ending, the woman who (*MILDRED rises with a look of despair at RODNEY.*) has kept us up at night waiting for the final page of her latest mystery. (*She bows.*)

MILDRED. (*Pointedly at JASON.*) I'm constantly thinking of a new way to kill people. (*Sits.*)

JASON. Brad Benedict, the man who modernized the spy. His heroes are hard-hitting and perform with no holds barred, whether it's with the enemy or with a beautiful woman.

BRAD. (*After JESS prods him, he rises quickly and shyly.*) Thank you. (*Reseats himself quickly.*)

JASON. And finally, Rodney Duckton, the gentleman who terrified us when we were young with such monsters as the Creeping Fiend, the Crawling Hand, and the Ghoulish Girl, and who later went on to create the master private eye of the thirties, the one and only two-fisted and two-gunned Jack Club.

RODNEY. (*Rises and bows.*) It was nothing really, just an extension of myself. You see—

WHIT. (*Realizing RODNEY is prepared for a long speech.*) Oh, do sit down. (*After a glare at WHIT, RODNEY sits again.*)

JASON. It is my idea, or rather the idea of the WMT Studios—

JESS. Watch that or you'll get fired.

JASON. —to combine these talents, to put a little Maxwell here, a splash of Benedict there, a dose of Duckton, a few dashes of Olives, and come up with a tossed salad of murder.

WHIT. Block that metaphor.

JASON. This stage setting which you see before you is an exact reproduction of the living room of Vulture's Vault.

MILDRED. Does everything have to be alliterative?

JASON. (*Showing he is upset at the authors, although he continues to ignore them.*) From the time when buccaneers sailed the Spanish Main, there has been a house

on a small island off Jamaica which has been shrouded with mystery. That house is called Vulture's Vault. That famous pirate, Redbeard, built it with slave labor, stored his riches there, and died in the very room we have copied for you. During the twenties, Vulture's Vault was used as a storage depot for liquor being run illegally into the United States. *(One of his cards is out of order, which causes him a momentary embarrassed pause while he shuffles cards.)* Sold in 1931 to Morgan Fitzby, it was the island where the multimillionaire recluse met his unfortunate end—a knife protruding from his back.

MILDRED. This dialogue is terrible.

JESS. *(With a look to the audience.)* Appalling.

JASON. *(Crosses L. to MILDRED.)* Miss Maxwell, I am not a successful author like you. Your turn will come.

RODNEY. If he doesn't shut up soon, the audience will leave. *(Smiles at them.)*

JESS. *(To the audience.)* Hang on, it can't get much worse.

WHIT. *(To audience.)* If there are any reviewers out there, that's what is known as a quotable line.

JASON. *(Tries to laugh it off. Crosses between settee and desk.)* As you can see, we're all very informal at this gathering. *(Moves back D. R.)* Tonight our authors will get acquainted with each other and their working methods. It will just be a little fun.

BRAD. I hate games.

RODNEY. I rather fancy myself at cribbage, and—

JASON. Mr. Duckton—

RODNEY. Sorry.

JASON. Immediately following this show, our five authors will be flown to the Caribbean where tomorrow they will travel by small boat to Vulture's Vault. There, ladies and gentlemen, they will create—create stories of suspense, intrigue, and murder. A series rivaled by none in the history of television. *(Pauses as he waits. Dis-*

appointed.) Oh, dear, I rather expected a little applause there.

WHIT. And another copywriter's head will fall.

JESS. Do be quiet, darling, this might be fun.

JASON. The series will be shot here on this very set with the leading actors of a bygone era. WMT is going to bring back stars who, along with these authors, you have almost forgotten.

(This offends the authors immeasurably and they all rise. The following six speeches are said in unison.)

JASON. Please, authors, please.

WHIT. That does it!

BRAD. Passe at thirty-two.

JESS. Grab the thermos, Whit, we're leaving.

MILDRED. I could commit murder now!

RODNEY. I loathe honesty in the young.

JASON. Let me remind you of the ironclad contracts our lawyers have drawn up. *(This quiets the authors.)* And also the salaries you are being paid. And the fact that your combined sales in the past two years haven't equaled one month of the country's best seller, "Sex For Profit."

WHIT. *(As they reseal themselves.)* Is the thermos empty?

MILDRED. I could drink hemlock.

RODNEY. Jack Club would blast his way out of here.

BRAD. *(To RODNEY.)* I should have planted a honing device on him last week. *(Stands by settee. WHIT fills glasses as JESS holds them, then WHIT sits on settee.)*

JASON. Now for our get-acquainted game. The envelope, please. *(A hand comes out of the wings from D. R. holding a large, white envelope.)*