

SCREENPLAY FOR MURDER

Written by

Mark Ndlovu

Not to be produced without the permission
Of the author. (C) marklevitendlovu@gmail.com

INT. SOUND STAGE - DAY

Super: Hollywood 1956

A crew of TECHNICIANS, LIGHTING MEN, PROP MEN, GRIPS, CAMERA MEN, ETC., are busy setting up for the next take.

In the midst of this confusion JOHN HAMMOND, screen idol, and EMERY EDWARDS, his director, sit side by side in the usual canvas chairs.

Over the ad lib background shouting, their conversation becomes audible.

EDWARDS

Well, John... this is the final scene. With luck, shooting will be over by this afternoon.

HAMMOND

Thank God. I'm bushed. Now I'll be able to get away for a couple of weeks before I start my next picture.

EDWARDS

Where you headed? Up to your country place in the valley?

HAMMOND

That's right... and I can sure use the rest. The shooting schedule on this picture really took a lot out of me. I... I guess I'm getting old, Emery.

EDWARDS

What? You getting old, John? Don't make me laugh. Why you're the heart-throb of millions of love-starved American women. To them, you'll never get old. You'll always be young and handsome.

HAMMOND

One of these days, those millions of women are going to be in for a shock of their lives. When the make-up no longer hides the wrinkles.

(pauses, looks around)

Say, what's holding up the scene anyway?

EDWARDS
 (rises from his chair)
 You've got me.

He shouts across set to ASSISTANT DIRECTOR:

EDWARDS (CONT'D)
 Hey, Max! What's holding it up?

MAX
 Mr. Hammond's stand-in, Mr.
 Edwards. We're waiting for him so
 we can set up the lights.

EDWARDS
 Well, where in blazes is he? Didn't
 he show up today?

MAX
 He came in late, Mr. Edwards. He's
 in with Pierre, having make-up put
 on.

INT. MAKE UP DEPARTMENT - DAY

John Hammonds stand in, RUSSEL SLADE, sits before a lighted mirror as PIERRE MARSEL, the studio make up man, works over him.

SLADE
 For Pete's sake, Pierre! Hurry up!
 I'm late.

PIERRE
 I'm working as fast as I can,
 M'sieu Slade. Have a little
 patience. I will be through
 shortly.

SLADE
 Patience?
 (laughs)
 Pierre, that's about all I've
 got... patience.

Slade reflects in grim silence. Pierre studies him through the mirror, then grins.

PIERRE
 You know, M'sieu Slade, I am
 constantly amazed by the striking
 similarity between your face and
 that of M'sieu Hammond's.

(MORE)

PIERRE (CONT'D)

I work on both and I know. They are almost alike.

SLADE

Yeah, I know. That's why I'll never be anything more than a stand-in, Pierre. Because I look so much like the great star, John Hammond.

Pierre studies Russel Slade in the mirror. His grin vanishes. He bends forwards and whispers.

PIERRE

Why if I tried, M'sieu Slade, I could make you look exactly like M'sieu Hammons. No one, unless he knew you both intimately off the screen, would be able to tell you apart.

SLADE

(glancing up at Pierre
with a quick look of
sudden understanding)
Really, Pierre?

PIERRE

Really, M'sieu Slade. In fact, if anything were to, say, happen to M'sieu Hammond, the studio could use you in his place... and the public would never know the difference.

SLADE

You... you think they'd do that, Pierre?

PIERRE

Why, but of course! They would be forced to. John Hammond is a great box office attraction. You do not just ... poof... give up that kind of business so easily. Not if there's a way to save it.

INT. SOUND STAGE - DAY

John Hammond is pacing the floor angrily. Emery Edwards is trying to calm him. Most of the grips and technicians are finished with their work and are standing around watching Hammond's display of temper.

HAMMOND

Where is he? We've wasted twenty minutes already, waiting for him.

EDWARDS

Take it easy, John. He'll be ready soon. Don't get yourself worked up. It's the last day of shooting and... Ah, here he comes now.

Mr. Russel Slade enters breathlessly. John Hammond stands with arms folded in annoyance.

HAMMOND

Well, it's about time you got here...

EDWARDS

Slade, do you realize what this delay has cost the studio?

SLADE

I'm sorry I'm late, Mr. Edwards. My car broke down on the freeway, and...

EDWARDS

(shouting)

Never mind! Just get out there so they can set up the lights! Now! This minute!

SLADE

(glancing around,
embarrassed)

Y-yes, sir.

The sound and stage technicians go to work on Russel Slade.

The assistant director jostles him into the scene position, chalking his foot-placement on the stage floor.

The LIGHTING DIRECTOR bustles about, calling for battery after battery of blinding klieg lights.

The CAMERA DIRECTOR checks for exposure readings.

The entire scene is one of harassment and confusion... with Slade, perspiring under the heat of the lights, fighting back his inner rage.

ASST. DIR.

Hold it right there, Slade! Don't move! Don't move an inch!

LIGHTING DIR.

That's good! Now the overheads!
Hold it! Douse that spot! Bring
down that flood! Good! That's it...

CAMERA DIR.

Head up, Mr. Slade! Up! Now, this
way a little! That's it! Hold it!
Okay, Joe! Shoot it at 5.6...

EDWARDS

Let's go! Let's go...

CLOSE ON Russel Slade's perspiring face. His expression betrays his hate for what he considers to be the indignities he must suffer in his job as stand in for John Hammond.

ASST. DIR.

Okay, Mr. Edwards. Everything's
set.

EDWARDS

Alright, everybody! We're going to
shoot the scene! Places please!
Let's make it good! Off the set,
Slade. Slade! Move! Off the set...
but stay on call.

Slade moves off the set grimly as John Hammond comes out of the cool shadows.

With the preparations for the shooting of the scene finished, Slade is no longer needed.

He watches from the sidelines as Hammond steps into the chalk marks and a make-up assistant deftly touches up his face with powder.

EDWARDS (CONT'D)

Ready, John?

HAMMOND

All ready.

ASST. DIR.

Quiet on the set! This is a take!

EXT. STUDIO GATE - DAY

A convertible approaches from within the studio lot. It is an old car which has seen better days. Slade is at the wheel. He nods to the GATEKEEPER as he drives slowly through.

SLADE
Good night, Larry.

GATEKEEPER
Good night, Mr. Hammond.

SLADE
(laughs)
Thanks for the compliment, Larry.

GATEKEEPER
(peers at Slade)
Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Slade. I thought
you were Mr. Hammond.

INT. SOUND STAGE - DAY

Everyone has left the set except John Hammond and his Director, Emery Edwards. They stand alone, in the silent shadows, their voices echoing over the deserted stage.

EDWARDS
Well, John. That wraps it up.
Another John Hammond hit goes into
the can. How do you feel? Relieved,
I'll bet...

HAMMOND
And tired. So long, Emery. I'll see
you in two weeks. If you need me
for any re-takes, I'll be at my
lodge.

INT./EXT. SLADES CONVERTIBLE/STREET - DAY

Russel Slade drives home. He stares grimly at the road ahead.
He thinks:

SLADE (V.O.)
What a rotten deal! Even the
gatekeeper thought I was John
Hammond. I'll never get anywhere in
Hollywood as long as he's around.
I'll always be nothing more than
his stand-in.

INSERT FLASHBACK CUT

PIERRE

(whispering)

In fact, if anything were to, say, happen to M'sieu Hammond, the studio could use you in his place... and the public would never know the difference.

BACK TO PRESENT

SLADE

(nodding grimly)

Yeah. Yeah! That's it!

A grim, almost maniacal expression. Glazed staring eyes.

SLADE (V.O.)

That's it. If Hammond were dead, I'd be made! The studio couldn't afford to lose a money maker like him. They'd consider anything, even a crazy idea like Marcel's! That's it! I've got to get rid of John Hammond! I've got to kill him!

INT. HAMMOND'S BEVERLY HILLS HOME - DAY

There are some suitcases in the foyer, and BILLINGS, the butler, is helping Hammond into his coat.

HAMMOND

I'll be back in two weeks, Billings. If any urgent thing comes up, you know where to reach me.

BILLINGS

Yes, sir. Very good, sir.

PHONE RINGS. Billings walks across the living room to answer it. Hammond waits in the background.

HAMMOND

Oh, no. Don't tell me that's the studio with a re-take call for tomorrow morning.

BILLINGS

(hesitating, before jangling phone)

Should I answer it, Sir?

HAMMOND

(shrugs)

Oh, go ahead. I'll have to get it over with eventually.

Billings picks up the phone, talks quietly for a few seconds, then covers the mouthpiece, turning to Hammond.

BILLINGS

It's Mr. Slade, your studio stand-in. He wants to speak to you. He wants to know if you'll be in tonight. He says it's urgent.

HAMMOND

(shaking head, waving hand)

No. No. Tell him I've already left for my lodge. Tell him to see me when I get back.

Billings turns back to the phone as Hammond picks up bags and exits the house.

BILLINGS

I'm terribly sorry, Mr Slade. But you missed Mr. Hammond. He's already left for his lodge in the valley. You can see him when he gets back. Yes. In about two weeks. Yes. Sorry...

INT./EXT. HAMMONDS CONVERTIBLE/COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

Hammond's white cadillac convertible speeds along a country road.

At the wheel, Hammond seems more relaxed.

EXT. RUSTIC LAKESIDE LODGE - MORNING

Birds and crickets chirp. The lodge is opposite a beautiful quiet lake.

Hammond comes out on the porch, yawns and stretches. The scene is one of peaceful contentment, and yet there is an air of impending doom symbolized by a distant rumble of thunder.

HAMMOND

(yawn)

Ahhh ... this is the life.

(MORE)

HAMMOND (CONT'D)

No early calls. Sleep late. It's
like a shot in the arm ...

He comes down the porch and onto a well kept lawn, heading to a gasoline powered lawn mower.

HAMMOND (V.O.)

(thinking)

Looks like the caretaker left the
lawnmower out all night. I've often
wondered how one of these work.

He examines the lawn mower.

HAMMOND (V.O.)

(thinking)

This must be the starting rope,
draped over the handle.

He wraps rope around the starting drum and yanks hard. The engine coughs and begins to sputter...

INT./EXT. SLADES CONVERTIBLE/TREE-LINED ROAD - CONTINUOUS

Russel Slade's old car sputters to a stop amid heavy shrubbery. He looks around furtively.

SLADE (V.O.)

(thinking)

So far, so good. I'd better go the
rest of the way on foot so no one
spots me. If I know Hammond, he'll
be alone up there and it'll be
easy...

Slade gets out his car and draws a gun from his pocket. He starts through the underbrush in the direction of Hammond's lakeside lodge. His jaw is set. He grimaces.

EXT. RUSTIC LAKESIDE LODGE - CONTINUOUS

John Hammond walks briskly behind the sputtering lawn mower as it bumps over his spacious property.

SLADE

steps out of the bushes at the edge of Hammond's property.

HAMMOND

busily guides the lawn mower, unaware of Slade's appearance.

SLADE
moves toward Hammond slowly, gun drawn, face grim, eyes
burning.

SLADE
Morning, Hammond.

Hammond turns - the gun ROARS in Slade's hand, spitting flame
and smoke again and again.

Hammond staggers, face distorted in surprise and pain, then
he falls... three holes in his chest.

Slade stands over him, smoking gun in hand, grinning
insanely.

Slade turns and sprints across the lawn, looking back over
his shoulder at the prostrate form of John Hammond. He does
not see the neat little 'keep off the grass' sign in his
path, and he stumbles awkwardly over it.

SLADE (CONT'D)
(in surprise)
What the ...?

Slade falls forward, striking his head soundly on the
flagstone walk.

The lawn mower chugs crazily over lawn moving toward the
unconscious Russel Slade, it's lethal blades spinning,
catching the morning sunlight. The lawn mower bears down on
Slade, sending back a fine waterfall of green clippings...
rolling nearer... and nearer... and nearer to his head.

Slade slowly opens his eyes and sees the machine almost upon
him. Too late to move, paralyzed with fear and horror, he can
only scream and we -

CUT TO BLACK

THE END.