

THE BUTTON

A Dramatic Reading

by
Robert Newman



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The scene is a solitary confinement cell in a large American prison. It is a stone-walled room about six feet square and in it, a hard cot, no other object of any kind. The room is in absolute darkness. On the cot sits a prisoner, Joe Ransom, about forty years of age. He is in solitary after a prison riot in which another convict has been murdered. His head in his hands, he sits and rocks from side to side on the cot; the springs creak with every move. Suddenly he stops swaying, lifts his head and listens. Far away an iron door opens.

Warden! Warden! I knew you'd come. Warden, listen—listen to me. listen, Warden, you gotta take me out of here. You gotta, see? I'm goin' nuts! I can't stand it, Warden, I'm goin' nuts!

Look, look, Warden, I'll tell you what I'll do, see. I'll confess. Get me a pencil and paper and a little light and I'll write out a confession. Then you can take me out and hang me. I'll confess, see—Warden! (Shouts) Warden, are you listenin'? I tell you I killed him. I killed him! I KILLED HIM!—

All right. All right. I'll be calm, see—Calm an' quiet, so's you'll know I mean what I'm sayin'. Listen: I, Joe Ransom, killed my cellmate, Mike Malari. I did it. An' I'll tell you why, Warden. It was his eyes. He used to sit there starin' at me. The guards wouldn't put me in another cell. They just laughed, Warden. Thought it was funny, they did, him starin' at me like that. Five years, Warden, five years I stood it. Five years I stood those eyes. Then I killed him. That night when hell broke loose in the block an' everybody was fightin' back and forth in the corridor, I killed him. It was him or me, Warden, him or me—So I squeezed his throat, 'til I knew he wouldn't stare at me no more. There Warden, I confessed. Now hang me—do anything to me—only take me out of this hole. I'm afraid, Warden, I'm afraid of bein' alone in this dark—I start seein' things—I start seein'—I start seein' Mike's eyes again! (Shouts) Warden! Take me out! Open this door! Take me out! Take me out! Take me out! (Pause, silence. Then, almost timidly) Warden!—

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