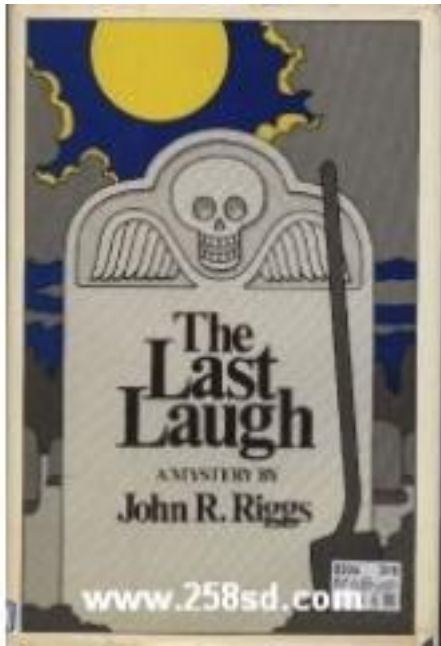


The Last Laugh



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C H A P T E R 1
Si Buckles was dead. No question about it. Si Buckles was dead. He was my age—forty—and with his ruddy skin and boyish smile that made him look like a plump Howdy Doody—it seemed he'd live forever. But we were burying him now—and the thud of his casket at the bottom of his grave had a very final ring to it. I pulled up the collar of my overcoat. It had started to snow—large wet flakes that stung as they hit and left Navoe Cemetery a pinto brown and white. Turning away from the wind and the snow and burying my head a little deeper in my coat—I remembered it was April—April Fools Day—the most appropriate day I knew of to bury Si Buckles. Si had never grown up. He had a childlike sense of humor—a child's penchant for practical jokes—and unfortunately a child's simple-minded cruelty. He'd been

threatened more than once by more than one of us in Oakallai but he was so much like a child it was hard to hate Sii even when he was pouring salt into your iced tea. Though I couldn t say I really knew him. I knew where he lived where he worked and that he wore the same plaid flannel shirt every day of his life. But he was like a fire siren--someone you never noticed until he rang in your ear. That bothered me. It seemed I d buried too many like Sii that 0

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