

The week-end : the surgeon's secrets.

Contributors

Booth, John.
Royal College of Surgeons of England

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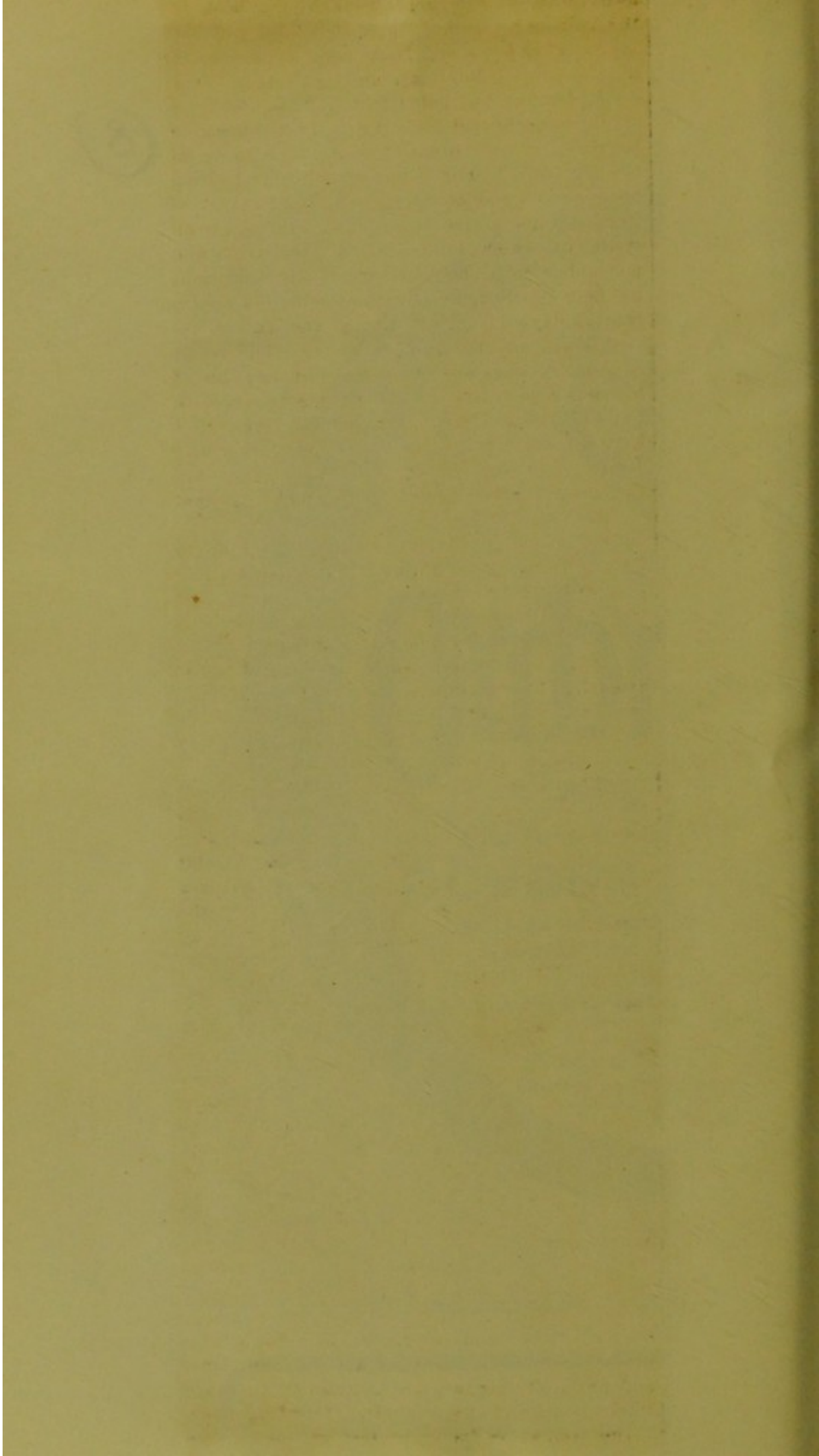
Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

THE WEEK END.

THE SURGEONS' SECRETS.

Few Londoners surely there are, or stranger: to the capital penetrating so far from the Strand as to Lincoln's Inn Fields, who cannot claim acquaintance with the Royal College of Surgeons of England. Its grimy but still impressive front, its vast bulk and air of professional stability and labour; these things loom very large upon the south side of the pleasant square where they are to be found, and for many a year have dominated it. It matters little that this dignified block stands where once stood a theatre of which we know very little—it was long ago—except that it had rather a notable reputation for scandal; or that in after years, when the players had made their final exit from the stage of Lincoln's Inn Fields, here was a pottery, a mere trading concern in no way to be compared with a professional institution of the first magnitude. This is the Royal College of Surgeons of England, and no man shall gainsay it.

Once you pass within its stately portal, a welcome change brings itself to view. For, if the exterior is, as I have said already, grimy, and if it also is of forbidding and sombre aspect, the interior is clean, light, airy, and in some indefinable way even stimulating. The hall is lofty and finely proportioned, the staircase a noble part of the structure and fulfilling a more important place in the design of the whole than merely a means of proceeding from one level to another. As you pass along it marble busts of the great surgeons of the past regard you with mild and placid eye. The unmistakeable features of Paget are there, borne company by many another cold marble shape, and of course by Hunter's. John Hunter, the greatest surgeon who ever lived, according to many writers, and one of the most distinguished ornaments of his profession in any case, is no less than the tutelary genius of the College. In one room his old clock still ticks upon the mantel-piece. In another room the librarian writes at Hunter's desk. Elsewhere is that portrait of him which Reynolds painted in circumstances that many tellings have made historic. Hunter was not a good sitter. He was a man of restless mind, a man who valued more than books his own practical learning, his own dissections, and his



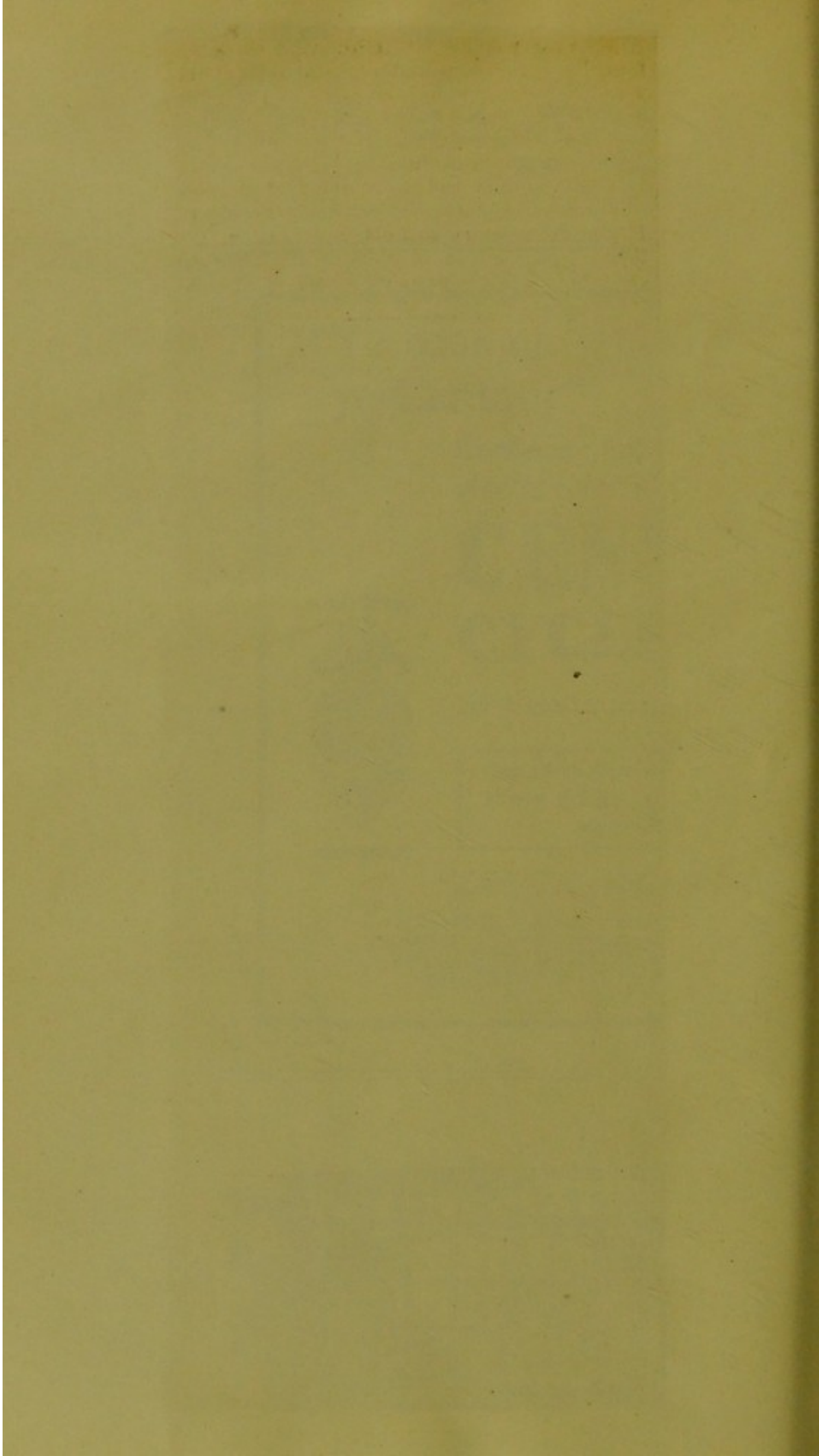
own thought. Reynolds gave him a book in the vain effort to keep him still, and you can see it in the portrait lying open at a page of physiological diagrams, and neglected. The artist despaired of doing justice to the features of his subject; and then it was that something happened which literally was the making of the portrait. For Hunter, suddenly taking up some new line of thought that had presented itself to his active brain, fell into a brown study in which he remained absorbed and motionless until he had carried his reflections to their conclusion. Swift to seize his opportunity, Reynolds boldly turned the canvas upside down, and began work anew. The result is in many ways one of the most remarkable of his men's portraits, and there is a tale told in the College, and no doubt perfectly true, that if you carefully examine the picture in a strong light you can quite clearly make out the general arrangement of Reynolds' original design.

For all that, the most tangible relic of Hunter is the great museum which represented no inconsiderable part of his life's work. He was a collector of objects bearing upon his profession throughout almost the whole of his working years, and while he devoted great attention to specimens connected with the human frame and the ills that human flesh is heir to, he also bought many animals, which he studied when alive, and dissected and prepared after death. When Hunter himself changed his world, the fate of his collections was for some time uncertain, the principal difficulty being the raising of the substantial sum of money at which they were valued; but they ultimately became the property of the College of Surgeons, and formed the nucleus of what I suppose is one of the strangest museums in the world. Two days ago I had the privilege of spending a morning there, and saw many objects of a kind which do not often enter within the purview of the layman. Thousands of them are preserved in spirits in wide-mouthed glass jars; many more are wax models of parts of the anatomy, exhibiting a range of terrible diseases and abnormalities. All these things are modelled and coloured with a skill and fidelity not short of astonishing. It will be obvious that a museum of anatomy and pathology of this kind is not a museum to which public access can be as freely afforded as, say, to the Natural History Museum or any of the others at South Kensington; but admission is granted to persons who present certain credentials and introductions, and provided they are not squeamish they are likely to pass an exceedingly interesting hour.

The layman is likely to pick up many very

curious bits of general information. He will find, for instance, that the Biblical leper described as being as white as snow was not a sufferer from leprosy at all, and that the disease which laid him waste with the result indicated, was something entirely different from leprosy as it is known in more recent times. The error is, presumably, an error of translation rather than an actual error of description. When the late Frederick Shields was painting that great series of Biblical illustrations for which he became famous, and by which his artistry will be mainly remembered in time to come, he made a number of visits to this Museum in order to study the appearance of certain diseases mentioned in the episodes which he had selected for inclusion in his pictures. The leprosy incident presented considerable difficulties, for Shields wished to depict a leper, and it was essential that the snowy effect should be clearly represented. Eventually a middle course was found and followed, and the artist painted the wretched man swathed in white bandages and wrappings.

But it would be wrong to consider that the Museum contains little which, however interesting it may be, is not for one reason or another a thing of horror. As a matter of fact, there is much of sheer interest into which the horrible enters not at all, provided it is properly considered, and much that sheds new light upon the customs and conditions of the past. There is a portrait of Daniel Lambert who, for all he was so preposterously fat, was actually appointed to be governor of a prison. There is a drawing by Rowlandson of the Irish giant, whose skeleton is also in the collection; he stood 7ft. 9in. high, and was quite a favourite public character. How Hunter got possession of the body and added it to the collection at his house at Earl's Court is one of the queerest tales of real life imaginable, but about a number of other exhibits in the museum there are histories almost equally strange and unexpected. Who, for instance, was the eccentric old gentleman who rode in the Park on a white pony painted with purple spots, and, when his first wife died, set up her body in his sitting-room until he led another lady to the altar? And who was the other old gentleman who, on becoming a widower, embalmed the form of the late lamented and kept her many years under the bed? And who was the boy, who, when all London was roaring in the relentless grasp of the Great Fire, ran down into the vaults of a City church and there being shut in perished miserably of starvation?



tion? Poor lad, his shrivelled and shrunken form I saw two days ago; a pitiful relic of the greatest blessing that ever came in the guise of disaster. These things, perhaps, are old stories and half forgotten, like that other story of the labourer a century ago who was struck by lightning and had every shred of clothing ripped from his back. Do you doubt the story? If you do, pray be so kind as to call at the College, and ask to be shown the identical garments, taking particular note of the old turnip watch.

John Booth.

