

By BURNUM CLAYTON

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# THE NIGHT I WENT POACHING—AND SAW THE LIGHT

**M**Y FATHER was a Norfolk poacher and, as far back as I can remember, I went poaching, too. I used snares when I was young and, when I was older, a folding shotgun.

I shot hares, rabbits, wood pigeons, pheasants—the lot. That was my life—until one stormy night when everything changed.

I lived then in a little village called Colton, where I was well known as the village poacher. I was 26, but remember that December night as though it was yesterday.

**T**HERE was a howling wind and a fair drizzle—the sort of night that gamekeepers hate. So at about 11.30 I went out with the gun, under my coat, the stock tucked under my arm so that it did not show as I walked down the lane.

I was wearing an old RAF overcoat with a pocket right around the inside.

It was useful for poaching because Air Force blue

doesn't show up in dim light.

I walked about 2½ miles to a spinney. In the middle of it was a hollow where I knew the pheasants always roosted.

When I reached the hollow, I had to crawl on my knees, and brambles and thorn bushes made the going hard.

The wind was moaning through the spinney and the drizzle had soaked my coat.

But by the time I'd been there an hour my eyes were used to the dark and I had nine pheasants in my pocket.

Suddenly there was an almighty clap of thunder and a great oak tree above me at the top of the hollow just lit up. It stood up against the sky like a skeleton and I fell flat, dropping my gun.

I have never been so

frightened in my life. The hair on my neck stood on end.

For three minutes that seemed a lifetime, the old oak was lit up. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the light went and I could see nothing in the pitch darkness.

I just lay there in the wet brambles for minutes on end. I couldn't move.

I knew it was not thunder weather and I was well used to sheet lightning that lights up everything—not just a single tree.

**A**T last, still shaking, I groped around and found my gun, then hurried from the spinney. My wife was waiting up for me and she said there had been no thunder or lightning in the village.

Exactly what happened I shall never understand. But from that moment my life changed. I have never hunted or killed

since that moment, and I became a vegetarian.

That night I realised that there is more to life than destroying it.

And I am still convinced that what I heard and saw in the wood was something for me alone.



**WEEKEND** reader Burnum Clayton is 47 and is a chargehand in a factory in King's Lynn, Norfolk. He is married and has four children.