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In 1864, Captain Jeff Savage was tasked to find Carver's Raiders, a ruthless bunch of killers who blasted a bloody path through the Shenandoah Valley. The mission was a failure and Carver escaped with a handful of men.

Two years later John Carver has raised his head once more when he and his gang of killers robbed a bank in Summerton, Texas, and a bloodbath ensued. During the violent exchange, a young woman is taken captive – Savage's wife, Amy.

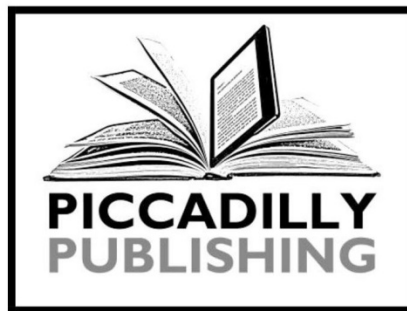
When Savage discovered her ravaged body, it set a bloody chain of events in motion.

Eight outlaws escaped the battle in Summerton, and now, armed with the names of those eight, Savage was going to finish what he started. He was going to track each man down and kill him ... slowly.

The only question was – would Savage live long enough to finish what he'd started?

JAKE HENRY

**DRIFTER 1:
SAVAGE**



2016

One

Shenandoah Valley 1864

“I WANT your patrol out here, to the east along the foot of The Blue Ridge Mountains. Apparently, we have reports from our left flank that there are raiders about. The General doesn’t want them to get behind us and attack our rear elements.” Colonel Augustus Fellows said stabbing a thick finger at the map of the Shenandoah Valley. The broad, creased sheet was spread out on the scarred top of a wooden table before him.

Fellows was a career officer. A West Point graduate who stood ramrod erect.

Savage leaned forward to get a closer look. The dull orange light cast by the lantern in the Colonel’s tent made it fairly difficult to see.

“Any idea who they are, sir?” Captain Jeff Savage asked his commanding officer.

Savage was thirty-one and now, in 1864, had been fighting against the Confederate States for two years. In that time he’d been in skirmish after skirmish and a few larger battles. The most notable being the clash at Brandy Station in the early stages of the Gettysburg campaign.

His dark brown eyes had seen things that day no man should have to see in a lifetime. His tanned face was a product of long days in the saddle with his Cavalry troop.

“Word is it’s Carver,” Fellows said grimly.

Savage straightened up his six-foot-one, solid built frame and ran a hand through his thick black hair.

“That’s all we need,” Savage commented.

John Carver was Texas born and a stone cold killer. He and his raiders rode under the Confederate flag, attacked all things Federal and lined his pockets with the proceeds of his forays. He paid no mind to those he killed in order to achieve results.

Although his deeds were committed under the Confederate flag, the Rebel high command had dismissed his unit as bandits and brigands after one of their raids on a small town in Kentucky the previous year had slaughtered many of its citizens.

“From down your way isn’t he?” Fellows inquired.

Savage nodded. “He’s from Texas, yes sir.”

Savage came from the small town of Summerton, in the Texas hill country. He’d worked as a

blacksmith and married a most wonderful young lady after a two-year courtship. A week later, he'd ridden out to join the Union in their fight against the Confederacy.

Amy had understood his decision. Many others had not, but he wasn't the first Texan to ride north to fight under the Union flag. He believed that his country should be a united one, not divided for the sake of helping rich men get richer. And after all, wasn't this the land of the free? How could it be claimed to be that when a race of people was enslaved by the will of others?

Savage came back to the present. "Sorry sir, what was that?"

"I said take fifty men from your troop and enough rations for a week," Fellows repeated. "Cut back from our present position to the north-east and make sure he's not trying to fall in behind us. Once you reach the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains, head south and ride a parallel course to the column."

"What kind of numbers were reported, sir?"

"Last reports were around thirty to forty riders," Fellows answered. "There may be less, but err on the side of caution and count on more. Pack extra ammunition."

"And if we find them?"

"Give them what they deserve, Captain," Fellows hissed in a low voice. "Kill them all. Let absolutely none escape."

"Yes, sir."

Savage picked up his Hardee hat from a stool in the corner of the tent and placed it firmly on his head.

"I'll leave at first light Colonel," he said. "If you'll excuse me?"

"Watch yourself out there Jeff," Fellows cautioned. "I'd rather you came back to the regiment alive."

"I'll do what I can, sir."

~*~

"Sergeant-Major, Hayes, are you there?" Savage called from his position outside a discolored canvas tent.

"Yes sir," a gravelly voice called back. "I'll be right with you."

The tent flap drew back and Sergeant-Major Ruben Hayes stepped out into the cool evening air.

The man straightened up and stretched his thick-set frame to its full height of six-four. The

orange glow of a nearby campfire cast over his features turned his square-jawed face bronze

He was a no-nonsense man who was reliable in any situation, whether in a crisis or just to get something done. With Savage's current requirements, Cater was the ideal person for the job.

"Are we movin' out, sir?" he asked Savage.

"In a fashion, Rube," he allowed. "I want fifty men ready to ride at first light. Designate two of them as scouts. I don't want any surprises where we're goin'. Also, extra ammunition for the men and rations for one week."

"Where is it we're goin', sir?"

"There's been reports of Carver's raiders over near the Blue Ridge mountains," Savage explained. "We're goin' to see if they're true or not. And if they are, we're under orders to wipe them out. Every last mother's son."

"I'll see to it, sir," Hayes acknowledged.

"One more thing, Rube. Find Lieutenant Forsythe and have him report to me. He'll be in command while we're gone."

"Right away, sir."

Savage watched as his most trusted man disappeared into the night to set about the tasks he'd been given.

~*~

The Union campfires weren't the only ones to cast an orange glow that night. The sky above the tiny hamlet of Bender's Hollow held a similar hue as many of the town's buildings burned.

Loud screams were accompanied by ribald laughter as men forced their unwelcome advances upon the few remaining women still alive in the town.

Major John Carver, self-appointed, stood in the Bender's Hollow main street and watched his men tear the place apart and start to burn it to the ground.

He was a solidly built man of thirty-seven, stood six-three and had blond hair and evil ice-blue eyes. He was square-jawed and wore Confederate issue butternut gray pants, woolen shirt and a Union blue Major's jacket with insignia to match.

Carver caught sight of a small group of men who had a well-dressed citizen in an awkward half carry half drag action as they crossed the street.

"Sergeant Thomas," he shouted above the din.

One of the men turned and ran towards him. He stopped in front of Carver and saluted. "Yes,

sir.”

“Just where are you taking that man?” Carver asked. “And who is he?”

“That be the mayor, sir.”

“What did you intend to do with him?”

Thomas, who was a slim man with brown hair and eyes, shrugged. “Not rightly sure at this time, sir.”

“Well, whatever it is, get it over with quickly and find the damned banker so we can get into his safe,” Carver snapped impatiently.

“Yes, sir.”

Carver turned his attention to another four men further along the street who had emerged from a small home. They dragged a woman behind them, who kicked and screamed with fear.

Behind them followed a man who desperately tried to stop them from molesting the woman. One could only assume that she was his wife.

One of the raiders turned away from the struggling woman, lashed out with a fist and caught the man flush on the jaw. He stood still as the man buckled at his feet. He calmly drew his side-arm then shot the unconscious form in the head before he could recover. The gunshot echoed along the street, blending with all the other noises around the town.

The raider turned his back on the corpse and faced the woman. With hands curled into claws, he grasped the top of her dress as she flailed vainly. He gave it a mighty reef and the bodice tore away which exposed her pale flesh to the waist as she tried desperately to regain her modesty.

A man ran out into the street from a burning building. His clothes burned fiercely and his high-pitched screams drowned out those of the woman. Slowly his screams abated and he fell forward on the road. The sickly-sweet smell of burnt flesh permeated the air around his unmoving form.

For the next thirty minutes, the plunder of Bender’s Hollow continued unchecked under the watchful eye of Carver. Businesses were looted then burned. The gunsmith shop was emptied followed by the bank safe.

When the raiders, at last, rode out of town, their magician’s trick had transformed the once thriving community into a pyre of burnt buildings and death.

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A low mist hung low and covered the Shenandoah Valley the following morning as the

column of cavalymen made ready to leave camp.

Horses stamped and snorted, keen to be moving. The rattle of pots sounded as cooks prepared hot food for the troops as the rest of the army broke camp to continue their march south.

Savage had almost finished a hot, bitter cup of coffee when his Sergeant-Major approached.

“The men are almost ready sir,” he said and glanced wistfully at the coffee mug.

“Grab yourself a cup Rube,” Savage said, indicating a spare mug by the small campfire.

“Thank you, sir. Don’t mind if I do.”

Savage smiled as he watched Hayes pour himself a cup. His face grew serious. “When we leave I want the scouts to ride no more than a mile in front of our column. Tell them I want regular reports.”

Hayes blew on his cup before he answered. “Yes, sir. I’ll see to it.”

“Everyone has extra ammunition and enough rations?”

“Saw to it myself.”

“Did the men get to eat?”

“Yes, sir.”

Savage looked about the camp one last time then threw the remains of his coffee onto the fire which caused it to spit and hiss.

“Well then, Rube, let’s go and see if we can catch this son of a bitch.”

~*~

The mist had burned off and was replaced by bright sunshine by mid-morning. The Shenandoah Valley was transformed from a drab gray landscape to a myriad of color.

Oak, hickory, maple, and chestnuts were the prevalent species that grew throughout the valley. The trees lined the narrow roads and provided a haven for the abundance of wildlife that flourished in and amongst them.

Mid-afternoon saw the column of blue-clad riders on a tree-lined lane. They’d reached the farthest point north-east and now had swung in a southerly direction and rode roughly parallel with the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Savage hipped in the saddle and signaled for Hayes to join him at the head of the column. The Sergeant-Major urged his mount forward and fell in beside Savage.

“There’s a town about a mile further on,” he told Hayes. “We’ll set up there for the night and move on again at first light. Establish some pickets when we arrive and swap them every couple

of hours.”

Savage was about to say more when a flurry of movement came from up ahead. One of the scouts came riding back, a look of concern etched deep in his face. He drew up in front of the two men.

“What is it, Walsh?” Savage asked.

“The town up ahead, sir,” Walsh gasped out between deep breaths. “It’s called Bender’s Hollow.”

“Yes, I know that trooper,” Savage acknowledged. “What about it?”

“It’s bad, sir,” Walsh said, shaking his head. “It’s ...”

The cavalryman’s voice trailed away.

“What’s bad?” Hayes snapped. “Come on, out with it lad.”

The scout gave Savage a pained expression. “You’d best see for yourself, sir.”

Savage nodded. “Alright trooper, lead the way.”

Before he rode off to follow the scout, Savage turned to Hayes. “Take over the column Rube.”

And with that Savage was gone.

~*~

A horrid stench greeted Savage when he rode into the ruin that was Bender’s Hollow. The smell was a putrid combination of charred wood, smoke, burnt flesh, and death. The bodies of men and women lay in the street. Unfortunately, even the children had not escaped the same grisly fate.

He came across the corpse of a woman, the bodice of her dress had been torn away. The bottom half was hiked up and she had a bullet hole in the side of her head. Nearby, a man had been tied to a wagon wheel and shot to death. Savage could only guess how long it had taken for him to die from the amount of bullet holes in him.

Even a dog hadn’t evaded the massacre.

“Who would do this, sir?” Walsh asked, his face pale. “What type of human would do this to women and children?”

“The type of men we’re after, Walsh.”

There was movement further along the street and Perry, the other scout appeared. With him was a man who they could see as they got closer, had a stunned expression on his face.

They stopped in front of Savage and Walsh.

“I found this here feller hidin’ out the back in some trees,” Perry explained. “I would have missed him except he moved and a branch snapped.”

Savage looked at him carefully then asked, “What’s your name?”

When he didn’t answer Perry said, “I tried talkin’ to him, sir, but he wouldn’t say anythin’.”

Savage nodded. “I’m not surprised. See if you can find anyone else still alive.”

Perry turned and left while Savage climbed down from his saddle and stood in front of the catatonic man. The sound of hooves came from behind him and the man’s eyes widened and he stiffened. He looked poised for flight and Savage grabbed his arm gently.

“Easy there,” he soothed. “They’re my men. They won’t hurt you.”

Sergeant-Major Hayes halted the column and dismounted. He stood beside Savage and stared around in disbelief.

“I take it that Carver has been here?” he commented.

“I’m not sure, but if I had to guess, I’d say you were right, Rube.”

“I’d like to have that son of a bitch standin’ in front of me,” Hayes swore. He then asked, “Who’s our friend?”

“I don’t know, he ain’t talking.”

“Sir?” Walsh said. “Sir, look.”

Savage looked at Walsh then followed his gaze. The street was no longer empty. Townsfolk had started to appear from amongst the charred ruins. Many of their faces reflected the expression that the man who stood beside him wore.

“Rube, find someone who’s capable of talkin’ and tellin’ us what the hell happened here. And have the men dismount and help out any way they can.”

“Yes, sir.”