

# In the Wilds of

# Florida

by W. H. G. Kingston



## Chapter 9

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Again Tim and I camped without having fallen in with Lejoillie and Carlos. Although we were anxious about ourselves, we had also reason to fear that they might meet with some disaster. They had, however, plenty of powder and shot. They had also a compass to guide them, so that, notwithstanding the foggy state of the atmosphere, they might be able to keep a direct course towards the Saint John. The birds we had shot afforded us an ample meal; and by cooking them at night, we had sufficient for breakfast the next day.

Notwithstanding the heat during the day-time, at night, owing to the thick fog, we felt it chilly in the extreme. The trees dripped with moisture; and it was with difficulty we could find a dry place to camp on. Tim insisted on watching, while I slept; but as soon as I awoke, I made him lie down, and sat up by our fire with my rifle by my side, trying to keep my eyes open by throwing on sticks so as to maintain a bright blaze which would keep wolves or pumas at a distance.

My faithful Caesar crouched by my side, every now and then opening his eyes and looking about to ascertain that no foe was near. Perhaps trusting to his vigilance, I made less strenuous efforts to keep myself from dozing; certain it is that, after a time, I sank down on the ground. When I awoke, the fire had almost gone out, and my blanket was nearly wet through. I jumped to my feet, and endeavoured to make the fire burn up again, puffing and blowing with all my might. I was unwilling to call Tim to my assistance.

While I was thus employed, day dawned. Though the light increased, the same heavy fog hung over the face of nature, and it was impossible to ascertain in what direction the sun was rising. We wrung out our wet blankets, and hung them on some sticks close to the fire to dry, while we breakfasted off some of the game we had cooked on the previous evening; but it was already high, and we knew that it would be useless to carry the remainder with us, except for the sake of Caesar, who would not object to it on that account.

“It won’t do to stay here doing nothing,” I observed; “we must look out for water, and try to kill some more game for our next meal.”

“Faith you’re right, Mr. Maurice,” said Tim. “I’m mighty thirsty as it is; an’ though there is no sun, we shall find it hot enough when we begin to trudge on.”

We accordingly rolled up our blankets, strapped on our packs, and commenced our march for the day. Our footsteps showed us the direction whence we had come, and we hoped that we had been directing our course eastward. As we marched on through the midst of a wide-extending pine-barren, eagerly looking out for water, we allayed our burning thirst by sucking some leaves which still retained the moisture precipitated on them during the night. Though the fog continued, the precious



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drops soon dried up, and our thirst became almost intolerable. Poor Caesar followed with his tongue out, showing that he was suffering as well as we were. No deer or other wild animals crossed our path. The fog prevented us from seeing more than a few yards off, so that it was possible we might pass close to water without discovering it. Had either of us been alone, we should most likely have sunk down in despair; but as it was, we encouraged each other, though we did not talk much, for our tongues were too dry to speak.

We were almost in despair of finding water, when Tim stopped, and whispered, "See there!" pointing on one side, where I could just make out dimly through the fog the form of a deer crossing the grass. In another instant it might disappear. We raised our rifles at the same moment, and fired. As the smoke cleared away, we expected to see the animal struggling on the ground, but it had vanished. We dashed forward, in vain looking out for it. When we reached the spot where we believed that it had been standing, we could discover no traces of blood to show that it had been wounded. We must have been deceived by the fog, for we could not suppose that we should otherwise both have missed.

Caesar rushed on, and we followed, hoping that he had got upon the trail of the deer.

"There it is! there it is!" cried Tim, after we had gone a considerable distance, and either the same deer or another rose before us, as indistinctly seen as the first. We stopped to reload our rifles, then cautiously crept forward. But the animal must have discovered us; for scarcely had we raised our rifles to our shoulders and pulled the triggers, than it vanished.

"I hit it, Tim; I'm sure I did!" I exclaimed.

But we were again doomed to disappointment; not a trace of the deer could we perceive. I cannot describe our sensations. It made us feel as if some phantom were mocking us. But it was by the fog alone we had been deceived, and we had both probably fired too high. We resolved that, should we see another deer, only one should fire at a time; and it was agreed that I should fire first, and should I miss, Tim should dash forward and try and get another shot before the animal had disappeared. In our eagerness to get up to the deer, we had not sufficiently marked the direction we had come, and we had to stop and consider how we should direct our course. We both thought that we were right, and once more we went on. We were now feeling hungry as well as thirsty, and I was very faint; still, knowing that it would not do to give in, I struggled on as well as I could. Had the fog cleared away, and enabled us to see the sun,—although the heat would have been increased,—we should have been in better spirits, for we should have known whether or not we were in the right direction. Now all was uncertain. We were uncertain but that we might be retracing our steps towards the lake, going west instead of east, as we wished to do. My watch told me that the day was advancing. Should we not obtain food and water before the morning, I felt I could scarcely hold out until then.

"It will be a pity," I heard Tim muttering; "but it must be done sooner than let the young master die."

"What's that you say?" I asked.

"I'm just thinkin' that we must kill Caesar an' eat him. If we die, he'll die; for the wolves an' painters, or maybe the rattlesnakes, will be puttin' an end to his life, so that it'll be no cruelty to kill him an' save ourselves."

"I should not have the heart to do that," I said. As my hunger increased, however, I began to



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think it would be better to eat poor Caesar than to die of starvation. Still, watching the faithful animal as he trotted on beside me, unconscious of the subject of our conversation, I resolved that it should only be done when we were reduced to the direst extremity. "We must wait until nightfall, Tim. I think I can hold out another day. I'll try my best, at all events," I said.

We walked on some way further, scarcely exchanging a word, when I saw a creature moving in the grass before me. I thought it was a snake, and was about to lift my gun to blow off its head, knowing that it would serve us for food, when I perceived that it was a tortoise.

"Hurrah!" cried Tim; "there's something that will keep us and Caesar alive for a day at least." And he rushed forward with his axe uplifted, intending to kill the animal.

"Stay!" I exclaimed. "See, it is evidently going steadily forward, as if making its way to water. It will lead us to it if we follow it; and when it has performed that service, we may kill it if necessary."

I had to hold back Caesar, who would have attacked the tortoise, which went steadily on, as I expected. Afraid of getting too close, lest we might alarm it and make it conceal itself, we kept at some distance. Our impatience, however, made us wish that it would move faster than it was doing. It went on in a straight line, apparently not discovering us, as we followed behind. How we longed that it would break into a run. I remembered the fable, however, of the hare and the tortoise: "Sure and steady wins the race." Parched with thirst as we were, it was a hard matter for us to restrain our eagerness. On went the tortoise, turning neither to the right nor to the left. It seemed to us that the ground was sloping, and that we were on the edge of a pine-barren. Perhaps it was making its way to some bottom or hummock, where we should find not only water but game. Tim and Caesar, however, became very impatient at the tortoise, which crawled on, taking no pains to hurry itself. I confess I myself had the greatest difficulty in not running on and giving it a shove with the muzzle of my rifle.

At length some palmetto-scrub appeared, and palmetto-palms and other trees which cannot exist without moisture. How thankful we felt when, just before the gloom of evening came on, a pool appeared before us. We forgot the tortoise, and dashed forward, eager to quench our thirst. While we were stooping down to do so, and Caesar was busy lapping the refreshing liquid, our slow-moving guide reached the water. I thought that it would put in its head, and drink as we were doing; instead of which, before we could catch it, the creature plunged into the pool and disappeared. However, I scarcely regretted this, as, by destroying it, we should have ill requited the valuable service it had performed to us.

The water greatly revived us, and we felt we could endure hunger for some hours longer, should no animal come in our way. As there would, however, still be some few minutes of daylight, we might be able to kill a bird or two for supper. Rising to our feet, we lost no time in looking out for game. We saw several birds,—green paroquets, woodpeckers, blue-birds, and red-birds; but we had frightened them from the spot where we had at first appeared. We accordingly made our way along the pool, Tim going in one direction, I in the other. I was very unwilling to throw away ammunition on small birds; but we had agreed to kill no more than we wanted. I soon shot a couple, and heard Tim fire twice. Just as I was reloading, I saw, through the thickening gloom, a huge brown bear descending a cabbage-palm, up which it had climbed to obtain the bunches of ripe fruit growing on the boughs. Though alone, I determined to attack it; so I dropped in a ball instead of small shot, as I was about to



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do. Creeping closer, I took, as I thought, a steady aim, and fired. Unfortunately, however, the bear was only wounded; and dropping to the ground faster than it had intended, it came towards me, growling furiously. I retreated slowly, reloading, and shouting to Tim to come to my assistance. The bear, however, advanced more speedily than was at all pleasant. Seeing a tree close to me, I stepped behind it, and again fired. The ball struck the bear; but the animal did not fall. It stopped, however, for a moment, and bit and scratched at its wound, giving me time to run behind another tree and again load. Tim now came running up. The bear was thus exposed to a cross-fire. Tim, supposing that the next instant the bear would be upon me, fired, forgetting that his gun was only loaded with small shot. He hit the animal, but in a way which only made it more furious. On it came, gnashing its teeth, resolved apparently to have its revenge on me. Knowing that my life depended upon the result, I took a steady aim at its chest. I fired, and over it rolled. As the bear was making desperate efforts to rise, Tim, going up to it, presented his rifle close to its head, and shot it dead.

“Hurrah!” he shouted; “we’ve got mate enough now to put strength into us for a good day’s march.”

We lost no time in cutting off as much of the bear’s flesh as we required for ourselves and Caesar. We then collected a quantity of firewood, keeping a look-out for snakes as we did so, and carried it up to a dry spot away from the pool. Losing no time in making a fire, we put on some of the meat to cook. I confess, however, that, to satisfy the cravings of our hunger, we chewed a portion of it without waiting till it was roasted. By the light of the fire we then constructed a hut of palmetto leaves, placing Caesar in front to give us warning should danger approach, for neither Tim nor I was able to watch.

After we had supped, before lying down I gave my powder-horn a shake. A very small quantity of powder remained. Tim imitated my example, and I guessed, by the blank look of his countenance, that his stock was equally reduced.

“It’s to be hoped that we’ll not be afther wantin’ it much, for I am mightily afraid that I’ve only got another charge or two remaining. We may, however, strike the Saint John to-morrow, an’ it won’t be long before we fall in with settlers,” he observed.

“We have reason to be thankful that we killed the bear, then,” I answered. “Do not let us anticipate misfortune until it overtakes us.”

We made as large a fire as the fuel we had collected would allow, and hung up our bear’s meat inside our hut for security. In spite of the howling of wolves and other noises which came across the pool, we fell asleep; and the hut sheltering us from the dews, we were far more comfortable than on previous nights. I heard Caesar give a bark two or three times, but that did not arouse me fully.

The night passed away without disturbance. At daybreak we packed up some of our bear’s flesh, which we hoped would keep good until dinner-time. Then having taken a draught of water, we continued our march, as we believed, to the east; but the fog still hung over the country, and we were left in as much doubt as before. We soon found ourselves again on the pine-barren; indeed, in spite of the prickly shrubs here and there, it afforded us better walking than any other part of the country. On and on we went, suffering almost as much as on the previous day from want of water. We halted about one o’clock to dine. Our bear’s flesh, even though roasted, was already high, and we feared that we should be unable to eat it for supper. We were able, however, to procure several wild-fruits and nuts,



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which, from the birds eating them, we knew to be wholesome, and these somewhat allayed our thirst.

The fog continued all day, there not being a breath of wind to blow it off. It made walking very fatiguing. Another night was approaching. We caught sight of some deer, but were afraid of expending our last charges of powder without being certain of bagging our game. We did not actually go supperless to bed, for by re-cooking the bear's meat, we managed to eat it; but we did not partake of a morsel more than was necessary to satisfy our hunger, though Caesar enjoyed a good meal.

The wind got up during the night, and the next morning the sun rose in a clear sky, just as we unrolled ourselves from our blankets.

"Now we shall know our way!" cried Tim, as he sprang to his feet.

I looked round to examine our trail of the previous evening. We had been tramping west instead of east, or very probably had been going round in a circle; at all events, we had gone away from the Saint John River. We had now to retrace our steps.

Steering in the direction whence the sun was rising, the bright beams dazzled our eyes. We had nothing to eat; but we hoped that before long we should be able to kill a deer or some large bird which would afford us sufficient food. We now guessed that our friends must be ahead; probably while they had been searching for us, we had been going away from them. All we had now to do was to press steadily onwards.

We were getting desperately hungry, when I saw something move in the grass a little in front of us. Hoping that it might be another tortoise, I ran forward, and found that it was a large black snake. I might have shot it; but not wishing to throw away a charge of powder, I drew my axe, and as it turned hissing towards me, with a single stroke I cut off its head. It was of a non-venomous species; but, oppressed by hunger, even had it been a rattlesnake, I would have proposed to eat it.

"Here is food, and we must not be particular," I said.

Tim hesitated. "Sure, Mr. Maurice, you'll not be afther eatin' a snake," he said.

"I could eat a toad, or a potful of caterpillars," I answered; and having cut off a portion for Caesar, I slung the remainder over my shoulder. We hastened on until we came to some brushwood, where we could collect sufficient fuel to make a fire. The Indians, I knew, eat snakes of all descriptions. We soon had it skinned and roasted; and Tim was surprised to find it far more palatable than he had expected.

"We shall not starve if we keep our wits awake," I said; "but we must not be over-particular as to what we eat."

Again we pushed on. I remembered the cabbage-palm, and determined to climb the first tree of the kind we met with to obtain a cabbage. It would be a change of diet, at all events.

I must pass over many of the incidents of our dreary march. One day a gobbler got up, at which Tim too eagerly fired, and missed. His last charge was thus expended. I had still one left. We saw several deer, but even the nearest was so far off that I dared not fire.

Though we were never actually without food for more than a day, the hard life we were leading was beginning to tell on both of us. Our shoes were almost worn out, our clothes torn to shreds by the prickly shrubs; and when I looked at Tim, and observed how thin and careworn he was, I supposed that I was much in the same state.



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At last we saw the sheen of water in the distance. The sight raised our spirits. We made towards it, though it was somewhat out of our way. It might be the Saint John, or one of its affluents, or perhaps a long lake. We had had no food all day. We should be certain to find wild-fowl on its banks, whether it was a lake or a stream. On reaching it, we were still uncertain what it was. Trees and shrubs grew thickly on the bank, beyond which were reeds, and on its surface floated water-lilies and other aquatic plants. I had my gun in my hand, when a large bird of beautiful plumage rose directly before me. I could not resist the temptation to fire. The bird did not drop immediately, though I saw that it was badly wounded. After fluttering, however, for a short time, it fell into the water. My faithful Caesar immediately plunged in and swam towards it. Forgetting for a moment the savage monsters which inhabited the streams and lakes of Florida, and eager to obtain the bird, I did not call him back. On he swam, and was just about to seize the duck, when he gave a loud cry, resembling a shriek rather than a bark, while he struggled desperately to return. The next instant, to my horror, my faithful animal disappeared beneath the surface. As he sank I caught sight, through the water, of a monstrous alligator, which was dragging him down. Had I possessed another charge of powder, I might have rescued him, or, at all events, have avenged his death; but my flask was empty.

I stood in vain expecting to see him reappear, but the monster had got him firmly in his grip. I watched and watched, and—I am not ashamed to say it—when all hope was gone, I burst into tears.

“We’ll never see him again,” said Tim, who now came up. “Those brutes keep their prey down at the bottom of the water, until they become rotten enough to suit their taste. It’s no use looking after him any longer. If we only had a store of powder an’ bullets, we’d pay the villain off. Come along now, master dear; it’s time to be lookin’ out for some other food.”

“But we must try and get the duck,” I said, recovering myself.

“Sure you’d not be after venturing into the water?” observed Tim.

“No; but perhaps the bird may float near the bank, and we may draw it in with a large stick.”

It appeared to me that the duck was already floating in towards the shore, when a black snout was seen above the surface, and the next instant the bird was snapped up and carried off by another alligator.

Whether the water was a stream or pool we could not ascertain,—there was no perceptible current; but still we hoped that by keeping along its bank it might lead down to the main river. We therefore got clear of the underwood, and proceeded in the direction we had before been following. Great was our disappointment to find, after going about a mile, that it came to a termination, and that it was only one of the many lakelets which are scattered over the face of the country. We saw several deer, and birds innumerable flew among the trees or rose from the bank of the lake, but none of them could we reach. We gazed at them with longing eyes.

“Maybe the river is not far off, and it will be best to push on for it,” observed Tim; “an’ when we get there, we shall fall in with settlers, or, at all events, be able to make our way either by land or in a canoe till we can borrow a fresh supply of powder and shot.”

I was not so sanguine as Tim on these points, for I knew that few if any settlers were to be found so high up the river, and that days if not weeks might pass before we could reach the habitations of civilised men. We now entered another pine-barren, stretching away to the eastward, which



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must be crossed before we could reach the river. Of its size I had no notion; it might extend for miles. Not a particle of food had we eaten during the day, and I was becoming so faint that I could scarcely drag one leg after the other. We talked of making traps to catch birds, but neither of us had much experience in the art of trap-making; and unless well acquainted with the habits of the birds frequenting the ground on which we might set our traps, we might starve long before one was caught. We could only therefore trudge forward, looking out for any living creature or any vegetable which might afford us food. Nothing could we see; even the snakes seemed to avoid us. We would have eaten frogs could we have found them, but not a pool in which any lived did we come across.

Another night was approaching. We should have to lie down without food or water; but to proceed during the darkness was impossible. Tim kept up his spirits.

“Sure we’ll be afther finding something or other to eat,” he exclaimed. “Sit down under this tree, Mr. Maurice dear; I’ll not go far from you, so don’t be afraid of losing me.”

I followed his advice, for I felt myself utterly incapable of going further. Scarcely had he gone twenty yards, when I saw him hurl his axe towards the root of a tree; then running forward with a shout of satisfaction, he lifted up an animal, which I saw was a young racoon. His weapon had almost cut it in two. We were not long, it may be supposed, in lighting a fire and cooking the flesh, almost the whole of which we devoured between us. I sighed as I thought of poor Caesar, and wished that he had been alive to eat a portion of my share. Our hunger satisfied, we rolled ourselves in our blankets, and quickly dropped off to sleep, with our fire burning at our feet. Had a puma wandered that way, we might easily have become its prey.

It was daylight when we awoke, but another of those heavy fogs which had before bewildered us covered the face of nature. We felt much inclined to remain where we were, until the fog should lift, and we might see how to direct our course. We ate the remainder of the racoon, but soon afterwards began to suffer from thirst, so Tim advised that we should move on in the hopes of coming to a pool, if not to the river itself. He was sure that he could steer a right course. I was doubtful about that, but as my thirst increased, I was ready to run every risk for the sake of finding water. On and on we went. Noon had long passed before we reached a small water-hole in a bottom fringed with reeds. We eagerly quenched our thirst, in spite of the nauseous taste of the water. Then Tim, thinking the pool too small to contain alligators, plunged in and began catching frogs.

“Get a fire lighted, Mr. Maurice; we’ll soon have some of these cooked,” he shouted out to me while thus employed.

Without much hesitation, after they had been a short time cooking, I plucked off the legs of the creatures, and eagerly ate them. They served to satisfy our hunger, if they did not do much to maintain our strength. We should have been more content had we been certain that we were approaching the river.

Without the sun by day and the stars by night to guide us, we might have been going, for all we could tell, to the right or left of our course; or, perhaps, even back again. I regretted not having more carefully studied the map. I knew that the Saint John River, in many places, consists of a chain of small lakelets, connected by a narrow stream; but of their position or extent I was very uncertain.

The next day found us wandering on across the pine-barren, as did the following, while the



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mist hung heavily over the country. During this time Tim killed a snake, and we fell in with another tortoise, which hunger compelled us at once to kill. Then again the mist cleared off, and we were able once more to proceed with certainty. I felt sure that during the previous days we had made but little forward progress, having gone rather towards the south or north, than on the course we wished to follow. Had either of us been alone, we should, I again felt, have sunk down and given up the struggle for life. At last we fell in with another hummock, in which were several cabbage-palm trees. Weak as I was, I managed to climb up and cut out the head of one of them, which afforded each of us a meal, though we suffered somewhat from eating it. I am afraid to say how many snakes we killed and ate. We certainly devoured between us half-a-dozen lizards, and at last learned to make frogs an ordinary article of diet. In spite of the food I have mentioned, which though varied was insufficient, we felt conscious that we were getting weaker and weaker. As I looked at Tim, I knew that he could not hold out much longer; and though he did not say what he thought of me, I believed that I was in a worse state. Often I detected him turning his eyes towards me with a sad expression. He insisted on carrying my gun and blanket, the weight of which greatly oppressed me. At last, when we had been wandering about for nearly two weeks, a sudden faintness came over me, and I sank to the ground. Tim threw himself by my side.

“Ochohone, ochohone! What will I be afther doin’, Mr. Maurice dear?” he exclaimed. “Cheer up, cheer up! Sure we’ll be gettin’ to the river before very long, and findin’ some food which will give you strength.”

As, however, I still felt unable to proceed, I proposed that he should push forward alone, as I was sure we could not be very far from the river. He might thus, at all events, have a chance of saving his own life, although I might not recover. I urged him not to lose time, but to try and find some food, hoping that a good meal would give me strength to proceed. As I insisted on his doing this, he begged that he might first carry me to a tree, at the foot of which he made up a bed with our blankets; and leaving our guns by my side, he hurried across the hummock. It appeared to me, however, that he was a long time absent. I began to be afraid that some accident had happened to him, when I saw him coming back, holding up a big racoon. This, though I could eat but little of it, enabled me once more to proceed. Another evening was approaching, and as yet no signs of the river appeared. The country, however, improved in appearance. We were now making our way through a fertile tract of open savanna, here and there covered with fresh green grass, and bordered by small hummocks full of trees, brilliant with orchids and other flowers. There were birds of sweet song and beautiful plumage—ivory-bills, red-birds, and mocking-birds, green paroquets, and many others of the woodpecker tribe—filling the forest with their various notes.

We now felt sure that we were approaching the river; but again a faintness came over me, and I doubted very much whether I should reach it. Suddenly Tim exclaimed, “Hurrah! I see a hut, and people moving about it. Even the Redskins would not refuse to help us; but I’m afther thinkin’ they’re either white men or blacks.”

Mustering my failing strength, I hurried on, helped by Tim. As we drew nearer, we saw two black men, and a woman seated on the ground, with a child near her. One of the blacks advanced, while the other stood gazing at us with no very friendly expression. I suspected that they were runaways, and





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that they fancied we had come in search of them. When, however, they saw our forlorn and tattered condition, and heard Tim exclaim, stretching out his hand, "I'm sure you'll be after givin' assistance to your white brothers in distress," the expression on their countenances changed.

"Who are you? What you come from?" asked the man who had approached us.

Tim explained that we were English travellers who had lost our companions, and that we were making our way across the country to the Saint John River.

They seemed perfectly satisfied with the account we gave of ourselves, as we judged by their changed manner. The black woman, getting up at once, made preparations for cooking some food, and afterwards suggested that Tim and I should lie down in the shade of the hut and rest. We gladly followed her advice; even Tim, poor fellow, now that his chief anxiety about me was over, appeared scarcely able to support himself on his feet. After we had thrown ourselves on the ground, the black woman, who had gone out, brought us each a bowl of goat's milk, with which I felt wonderfully refreshed. Almost directly afterwards we fell asleep.

It was already evening when the blacks awoke us, and placed before us a mess of rice, pork, and bananas.

We slept soundly all night; and next morning, when I awoke, I felt quite a different creature to what I had been the day before. We thought it best not to inquire too minutely who our good hosts were, though we had little doubt that they were, as we at first supposed, runaway slaves. The first question we put was whether they had seen anything of our friends; to which they replied in the negative, and told us that we were still nearly a day's journey from the river. One of them undertook to guide us to a part where he thought we might possibly find a canoe. If not, he advised that we should descend the stream on a raft, until we reached some settlers' huts, which he told us we should come to in a few hours. He begged us, however, not to mention, on any account, having met with him and his companions. This we willingly promised. The blacks, unfortunately, could not supply us with powder and shot, the small quantity they possessed being barely sufficient for their own wants; but they offered to give us enough of food to last us for a couple of days.

As we found ourselves utterly unable to travel, we were thankful to accept of their invitation to remain with them until we had recovered our strength.

