

Mario and the Big Feast

AN I-CAN-READ-AND-LEARN STORY
OF THE AMAZON RAIN FOREST

starring

PEPÉ and PANCHO

by

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María opened her eyes and heard her Mother moving around the store. The patterns of sun and shade from the Rain Forest came through the window and danced over her bed. The air was cool in her room, but she could already tell that the day ahead would be very hot.

At first she could not understand why her Mother would be working in the store so early. And then she remembered!

It was the day of the Big Feast!

Women from all over the village came as early as possible to get the best and freshest ingredients for all of their special dishes.

María's mother hurried from one customer to the next, helping each of them to find exactly what she needed.

María had never seen the store so busy. Even though it was starting to get very hot, people stayed and talked about what they were fixing and how good everything was going to be. Everyone was very excited!

Pepé and Pancho could not see the store from their lake.

The only thing they knew was that the sun was hotter than ever.

"I'm hot!" said Pancho.

"Me too!" said Pepé.

"Things just seem to be getting worse and worse since they cut down all those trees," said Pancho.

"There's no shade anywhere," said Pepé.

"This lake is getting smaller," said Pancho.

The Amazon Rain Forest is one of the most beautiful and delicate places in the world.

It is a place where life is in perfect balance.

Beautiful tall trees and gigantic creeping vines called "epiphytes" (eh-peh-fites) form a great green roof that covers the Rain Forest for thousands of miles. Epiphytes are the largest living things on Earth.

In the trees and far below on the forest floor many special animals make their homes - monkeys and parrots, snakes and anteaters, sloths and ocelots. Lots of fish and other animals live in the rivers and lakes.

Nowadays the Rain Forest is in great danger. This is because people keep coming in to the forest and cutting down all the tall trees and clearing the land. When they do this they upset the delicate balance of the Rain Forest and destroy the homes of all the special animals who live there.

Destroying the Rain Forest is called "deforestation" (dee-for-ess-tay-shun) and it is a problem that worries all the people in the world.

Besides giving a home to so many trees and animals, the plants of the Rain Forest create most of the oxygen which people and animals everywhere must breathe in order to live.

Back at the store María was trying hard to help her Mother with all of the customers. She ran and got things off the shelves when her mother asked. She smiled when the customers said nice things to her.

But she was so excited about the Big Feast that she kept forgetting what she was doing. She would stop in the middle of the store and listen to all the women talk about what they were going to make. If she closed her eyes, she could almost taste it.

Finally María's mother saw her standing with her eyes closed.

"María," she said. "It's too busy for you to help. Why don't you go outside and play?"

María had lived in the Rain Forest all of her life and loved everything about it. To her it was a magical world, filled with new places to explore and new friends to meet.

The first friends she met on the day of the Big Feast were the leafcutter ants crossing the path in a long, long line. Each of the ants carried a big piece of green leaf over its head like a funny-shaped umbrella.

"Where are you going, little ants?" asked María. "What are you doing with all of those leaves?"

"We are gardeners," said the ants. "We are the best gardeners in the world. We need these leaves to grow our garden."

"Are you getting ready for the Big Feast?" asked María.

"Yes," said the ants. "We are getting ready for the Big Feast."

Leafcutter ants live all over the Rain Forest and they are very hard workers. All day their scouts search the forest looking for leaves of just the right kind.

When the right kind is found, thousands of ants rush out to help bring back the special leaves. The ants cut the leaves into pieces and carry them for a long way through the forest.

The ants do not eat the leaves. They are gardeners. Deep inside the ant colony they use the leaves to grow a kind of fungus and it is the fungus, which is the ant's food.

Leafcutter ants eat a lot of food. Together they eat more food than all of the other animals in the Rain Forest put together.

Meanwhile at the lake Pepé and Pancho were also thinking about food.

"Man, am I HUNGRY!" said Pancho.

"I'm REALLY HUNGRY too!" said Pepé.

"Whatever happened to all those delicious little fish?" said Pancho.

"I think we ate them all," said Pepé.

"It wasn't us," said Pancho. "We hardly got any. I think it was those other guys that ate them all."

"There sure are an awful lot of us jammed into this lake," said Pepé. "No wonder there's no little fish left."

One fish that lives in the rivers and lakes of the Amazon Rain Forest is called the Piranha (peh-rah-nah). It is a very famous kind of fish.

Many people think that Piranha are dangerous because there are so many of them and, even though they are small, they have powerful jaws and lots of sharp teeth.

There are scary stories about Piranha eating people and animals much larger than themselves. These stories tell about cattle or people swimming in the water with the Piranha and being eaten alive in minutes by hundreds of biting fish who leave nothing behind but the bones. Most of these stories are untrue.

In general Piranha mainly eat fish that are even smaller than themselves. There is no reason to be afraid of them.

After her talk with the ants, María went looking for her friend Tomás. She hoped that Tomás would not be sleeping. Tomás was a tapir and tapirs sometimes sleep all day long.

She walked to the part of the forest where Tomás usually slept and followed the paths he had made in the bushes.

"Tomás," she called. "Are you at home?"

"Good morning, María," said Tomás.

"Good morning Tomás," she answered. "I'm glad that you are awake."

"Oh, yes," said Tomás. "There is not time to sleep today. I have to get lots of food."

"Are you getting ready for the Big Feast?" asked María.

"Yes," said Tomás. "I am getting ready for the Big Feast."

Tapirs (tape-ears) are one of the oldest kinds of animals living on Earth. They have been around for millions and millions of years.

They live in the Rain Forests of South America and Malaysia. They like warm, wet places where they can take lots of baths. They are even able to walk underwater!

They have long, rubbery noses. Their skin is very hard and tough. They have four toes on their front feet and three toes on their back feet.

They like to eat leaves and fruit and vegetables.

Tapirs eat a lot of food.

"Will you please stop talking about food!" said Pancho.

"I'm sorry. I can't help it," said Pepé.

"I'm so hungry I could eat ANYTHING," said Pancho.

"I could eat an elephant," said Pepé.

"There are no elephants here," said Pancho.

The only kinds of Piranha that can sometimes be dangerous are the ones that belong to the *Serrasalmus* (say-rah-sol-muss) family. They have large, powerful jaws and razor-sharp wedge-shaped teeth that work like tiny scissors so that they can cut and tear the flesh away from the things that they eat.

Together they live in large schools and are found in rivers and lakes in South America. They are attracted by movement and by the smell of blood in the water.

"Good morning, María," squawked Tonio the Toucan, flying through the forest above her.

"Good morning, Tony!" shouted María back up to him. "What are you doing out so early?"

"Looking for food!" squawked Tonio. "I'm trying to find my favorite berries."

"Are you getting ready of the Big Feast too?" asked María.

"Yes I am," answered Tonio. "I am gathering for the Big Feast."

After her visit with Tonio, María began looking for her friends, Mr. and Mrs. Kinkajou. The Kinkajous were María's favorites. They were the cutest animals in the forest. They were brown and soft and furry and lived up in the trees. They liked to hang from their tails and look at her upside down. Sometimes they let María see their new little baby, Kiki.

The Kinkajous liked to sleep during the daytime and so María did not get to see them very often.

She wandered for a long time, farther and farther off into the forest looking for them.

Kinkajous (kink-ah-jooz), also called "honey bears", look like a mixture between monkeys and squirrels. They live high in the trees of the Rain Forest and come out mainly at night. Kinkajous have large eyes and small ears. Their tails are very strong and will hold them while they hang from the tree branches.

They are very gentle and make very good pets.

"I think I'm going to pass out, I'm getting so hungry," said Pepé.

"Talking all the time doesn't make it any better," said Pancho.

"What else can I do? Said Pepé. "Boy could I go for a big hunk of meat right now!"

"If you don't be quiet, I may eat YOU," said Pancho.

"I think we're starving," said Pepé.

Most of the time, even Piranha of the *Serrasalmus* family are not dangerous. It is usually safe to be around them in rivers and places where there is lots of running water.

It is only when they are in lakes that are drying out and all of the food has been eaten that they might attack animals larger than themselves.

The name Piranha comes from an Indian word, which means "devil fish."

They are especially dangerous when they are starving.

María could not find Mr. or Mrs. Kinkajou anywhere. She wandered farther and farther away from the places that she knew. She wanted to find out if Kiki was going to have anything special for the Big Feast. She thought so much about Kiki that she forgot to watch where she was going.

Suddenly, the trees disappeared and the hot sun was shining right into her eyes, so brightly that she couldn't see.

At the same time she felt something rough scrape against her knee.

She quickly closed her eyes and looked away from the sun. What she saw when she reopened them a few moments later made her very sad. Someone had cut down all of the beautiful trees and taken them away. There was no place for the animals to live, no food for them to eat. Everything was dead and ugly.

When she looked down at her knee she saw that she had scraped it against the jagged edge of a dead tree stump. The scrape had broken her skin and there was a tiny round drop of bright red blood on María's knee.

Looking up, she noticed there was a lake off in the distance.

Piranha have a very powerful sense of smell. Scientists have found that putting even a single drop of blood or meat juice in the water can cause the fish to become very excited and swim towards the drop at great speed, even if they are a very long way away.

"Maybe I can wash my cut off in that water," said María.

As she got closer she noticed that the lake was starting to dry up in the hot sun. There were no trees to give it any shade. The water level had fallen and the banks were very steep and slippery.

She reached over the bank and washed her hand in the water. Then she used the water on her hand to wash the cut on her knee.

All of a sudden she noticed something moving in the water.

"I'm telling you for the last time, said Pancho. "If you don't stop talking, I'm going to . . . but WAIT! WHAT IS THAT WONDERFUL AROMA!!"

"It smells DELICIOUS!!" said Pepé. "I think it's coming from over there!"

"HURRY!" shouted Pancho. "We don't want to be too late!"

"Oh, look at all the poor fish," said María. "Why there are hundreds and hundreds of them trapped in the lake. The poor things. They don't have anything to eat and they look so hungry."

Standing at the side of the lake, looking at all of the dead tree stumps around her, María felt sadder and sadder for the fish as she thought of them left with no food on the day of the Big Feast.

As she leaned over to see them better, she forgot how slippery and steep the sides of the lake had become. Before she knew what was happening, her foot slipped in the mud and she fell in the lake with a loud splash. She made a lot of noise in the water as she tried hard to get out.

Pepé and Pancho and all of the other fish in the lake were very happy. They darted around faster and faster. The wonderful smell was EVERYWHERE now and, after having no food for such a long time, all of them could finally eat their fill.

"I can't get enough of this!" shouted Pepé.

"I can't understand what you're saying," said Pancho. "You have you mouth full."

"Sorry," said Pepé.

All in all, the day of the Big Feast turned out to be the best day anyone could ever remember.