



## **How Squirrel got its stripes - A Tale from the Ramayana of India**

*Retold by Laura Simms ©2001*

*- Each serves according to their strength. -*

Long ago in ancient India a ten-headed monster called Ravana the Rakshasa kidnapped a king's beloved wife. The king was named Rama and his queen was named Sita. Everyone loved the king and queen because their hearts were pure. King Rama waged war on Ravana and set off to battle. The great king of monkeys, King Hanuman, led the army.

They traveled until they came to a vast sea that they would have to cross to reach Ravana's kingdom. King Rama attempted to calm the raging ocean by shooting his magic arrows into the waves. But the King of the Sea rose up and said, "The seas can not be overcome by force, but only by building a strong bridge." So, King Rama ordered his monkeys to construct a stone bridge that could hold his entire invading army.

Monkey after monkey set to work carrying huge stones and enormous boulders to the seaside. Thousands of monkeys worked ceaselessly and King Rama was pleased. Then the king noticed that a small brown squirrel rushed up and down from the hills to the shore carrying little pebbles in her mouth. "What is that little creature doing?" he wondered.

The monkeys also saw the squirrel and grew angry. "Get out of our way," they screeched. "You are too small. You are not needed."

The little squirrel looked up and said, "I am helping to build the bridge to save Queen Sita." All the monkeys began to laugh. They held their sides and roared and hopped and mocked the little squirrel. "We have never heard anything so foolish in our entire lives," they said.

The squirrel answered, "I can not carry rocks or stones. I can only lift small pebbles, but that is what I can do to help. My heart weeps for Sita and I want to be of assistance."

The monkeys moved the squirrel away, but she continued to carry small pebbles and pile them up nearby. Finally, one monkey grew so irritated that he lifted the little animal and threw her into the air. The squirrel cried out, "Rama!" The king lifted his hand and caught the squirrel safely in his palm.



It was just at that moment that the monkeys realized they needed the little pebbles to place between the larger stones to keep the bridge from falling.

King Rama said to them, "Monkeys, never despise the weak or the deeds of those that are not as strong as you. Each serves according to his strength and capacities and each is needed to make this bridge." With three fingers, King Rama drew three lines down the squirrel's back. "What truly matters is not the strength one has, but how great one's love and devotion is." From that day forth squirrels have had three pale stripes on their rich brown furry backs—marks of the great King Rama. And that is how the strongest bridge across the sea was built.

