

March 1st

BULGARIA

THE FIRST OF MARCH



THE FIRST OF MARCH is an important date in the calendar of Bulgarian traditions. It marks the beginning of spring and all hopes for health, fortune and plenty in the coming year. This is the day on which baba (Grandma) Marta comes in and brings with her fortune and happiness. This is why the day is met with such exuberance.

The weather in March is very changeable in Bulgaria and sometimes it causes damage to crops and cattle. This was attributed to the difficult, unpleasant temperament of Old Woman Marta – a personification of the month of March. Just like an old woman, peevish and hard to please, she laughs one day and weeps the next. That's why on the first of March people had to rise early, because it was believed that baba Marta did not take kindly to finding people in bed when she arrived. So everybody would be busy in the villages. The householder's first task would be to hang up a piece of red cloth, an apron or a waistband on a tall tree in the yard or on the roof of the house. The belief was on seeing the colour red, baba Marta would see to it that there was plenty of sunshine for the crops.

On this day the elders of the family would make *martenitsi* – tassels of red and white woollen thread which they tie on the necks or arms of the young people and children and also on the farm animals. The symbol of martenitsa is to protect the wearer from the evil eye and sickness and to assure good health.

Nowadays Bulgarians still wear their beautiful martenitsi – round the wrist or pinned on the lapel. They give martenitsi to their family relatives and closest friends. They believe in the magical powers of the tradition and wear the red and white threads till the day they see a stork or a blossoming tree. Then the martenitsa is taken off and either tied to the blossom of the tree or placed under a stone. The stone is lifted after forty days: if ants are found crawling under it, it is a sign of happiness and health; if there are worms instead of ants, it is considered a bad sign.