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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed April 26, 1933

By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,
Authority on Meteorology.

THE RUSSET MOON

There is a popular superstition in France that, in clear weather, the moonlight of April and May causes tender plants to freeze and turn brown, even on nights when the thermometer shows a temperature above the freezing point. Accordingly the moon seen at that period of the year is known as the "lune rousse" ("russet moon"). A cloudy sky is said to protect plants from this alleged frigorific action of our lunar satellite. Arago, in his "Popular Astronomy," records the following anecdote:

"I am pleased to see you gathered around me," said Louis XVIII one day to the members of a deputation of the Bureau des Longitudes, who had come to present their Almanac and Annual, "for you will explain clearly to me what is the 'russet moon,' and how it acts upon the crops."

Laplace, to whom these words were addressed, was mystified and had to acknowledge that he not only knew nothing about the "russet moon," but had never even heard of it, though he had written so much about the moon. He looked around at his colleagues, but as no one seemed inclined to help him out of the difficulty he was compelled to acknowledge his ignorance.

"Sire, the 'russet moon' has no place in astronomical theory. We are not in a position, therefore, to satisfy the curiosity of your majesty."

That evening, the king made merry at the card-table over the perplexity of his Bureau of Longitudes who were unable to answer his query. When Laplace heard of this he hastened to the observatory to see Arago, asking him if he knew anything about the "russet moon," but the latter assured him that he had never heard of it before. However, he offered to make inquiries among the gardeners and horticulturists of the Jardin des Plantes, and as a result of his inquiries they told him that the "russet moon" is that which is first seen during the month of April, reaching the phase of full moon either at the end of that month or in the one following.

Flammarion, however, identifies the "russet moon" more definitely with the lunation that begins after Easter.

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