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No, dear ... You must turn off the lights

The 'challenge' photograph in the previous *Technical Tips* shows George Ellery Hale, George W. Ritchey, and John D. Hooker on Mount Wilson, c.1904. Jeremy Shears identified all three of them, and Denis Buczynski identified two of them. Neither of them identified the driver, nor the horses. Hale persuaded Hooker to fund the 100-inch reflector, which Ritchey intended to be a Ritchey-Chrétien system – but Hale blocked his scheme. The photograph above shows two people looking at a broken window. What had happened?

Dark adaption
 Bob Marriott



There was a time when dark adaption was considered an important factor for efficient observing, but with the advent and popularity of robotic and remote telescopes and imaging it now seems to be of less consequence. Nevertheless, it is essential for the visual observer. It is a measure of the light grasp of the eye, and insufficient pupillary aperture results in a lower magnitude limit and the decrement of faint and diffuse objects. (It is notable that the bush baby has a visual limit of about magnitude 9–10, but probably does not appreciate the dark skies of Africa.) Other than that, there is little to say. Therefore, this brief item cannot really be termed a 'technical tip'. Instead, it is a personal fulmination caused by current trends in so-called 'public education'. The mania for lighting has now reached the level at which observatories are floodlit. The two examples illustrated here are the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, and the Griffith Observatory, Los Angeles. The other photograph, of a public event, shows instruments being set up not only next to a fully lit building, but underneath lights. It is obviously not possible to show photographs of observers in the dark, but publicity such as this sends the completely wrong message that it is normal practice to observe with lights blazing. This lighting craze now extends to other activities. For example, some ornithologists feel the urge to watch floodlit birds, as shown in the photograph below, taken in a designated conservation area. Many conservationists, as well as local authorities with 'green' schemes which consist mostly of recycling bottles and cans, seem oblivious of the night sky, or at least are simply not interested. Observers of any kind must be part of the environment and adapt to it, not change it. The campaigns for dark skies have, to their great credit, had many successes nationally and internationally; but for some of us, light pollution becomes worse by the day, and 'dark adaption' results only in a clearer and brighter view of everything that is lit up, including a night sky almost barren of stars.

