



An Observing Night as Seen from the Other Side

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It is a major challenge for the technical staff at La Silla to handle experimental and unique type of equipments rather than well-tested commercial machines. But it is an art to deal with a particular species which is just as unique and very peculiar indeed: the astronomer.

The evolution of instrumentation technology has been most unkind to the observer. Nowadays all sorts of sophisticated gadgets are used to collect his photons. Occasionally they ruin his programme. But most disturbing of all is the fact that a little man of growing importance is now taking part in the observation media: the maintenance man.

At night when the instrument fails, hell is breaking loose at the telescope. A fearful little man with a red box is marching into the dome. Immediately confronted with a mass of contradictions, he will have to pave his way to some solid fault evidence. He will be assaulted by a storm of heated queries and complaints.

Why is he coming so late? Couldn't this be prevented? How long will it take to fix the problem? What is wrong anyway?

If only he knew! The little man is bracing himself. He knows he must stay calm and inspire confidence for the astronomer does not give him credit as a supreme act of faith. Above all he must display tools and activity. No time to think calmly or study the problem in a quiet place. Physical presence is expected. Else he might have to face interferences, tamperings, hot voices and even disorderly conducts.

Already the news are peddled over the mountain and several foreign faces are sniffing around, commenting the event, commenting the service, commenting the organization.

Gregarious comfort for the victim while the little man is still fiddling with the machine. In front flickering lights refuse to reveal their secret. Behind a tense and nervous face is forwarding more queries. Slowly he feels overcome by blasphemous thoughts.

At last he locates the speck of dust and the instrument starts rattling again.

The little man retreats, relieved and light hearted . . . until his beep, beep is calling again.



"At night, when the instrument fails . . ."

The European Coordinating Facility for the Space Telescope

On 26 June, ESO was chosen by ESA to be the host institute for the Space Telescope European Coordinating Facility. There were three other candidates: the Royal Observatory at Edinburgh, the Institute of Space Astrophysics at Frascati (Italy) and the Institut d'Astrophysique and the Observatoire de Paris in a joint proposal.

The major tasks of the Coordinating Facility will be:

- to provide information to prospective observers of observing programmes;
- to coordinate the development of data analysis software and to create additional software in response to the wishes of the European Space Telescope community;
- to archive and catalogue all Space Telescope observations and to make them available to European Scientists;
- to provide facilities for the reduction of the Space Telescope data by European observers.

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