A poet, travelogue writer, columnist and top-class humourist, Ibn-e-Insha was born Sher Muhammad Khan in 1927 in Punjab, India. After completing an M.A. at the University of Karachi in 1953, he worked for various government organisations, including Radio Pakistan. He also worked for quite some time for the United Nations. His association with the UN took him to various places all over the world – places which appear in his hilarious travelogue *Chalte Hain Tou Cheen Ko Chaliye* (Let’s Go to China if We Have to). Insha’s unique contribution to Urdu literature is his brand of humour that he so deftly uses in his treatment of serious subjects, whether political or social. His book *Urdu Ki Aakhri Kitab*, translated into English by David Matthews as *Urdu: The Final Book*, satiris various aspects of society in a humourist strain. The story translated here is from his collection of prose works titled *Aapse Kya Parda* (What to Hide from You).

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A writer hesitatingly enters the office of the editor of *Qaumi Adab*. ¹

Writer: *Ji*, I want to meet Allama Jagatpuri, the editor of *Qaumi Adab*. ²

Editor: Yes! Come in, please. Your name?

Writer: *Ji*, my name is Aladdin. Chirag – my alias. ³ Have inherited poetry as legacy. Literature is in my rucksack. My grandfather’s grandfather had come here in the reign of Sher Shah Suri from heavenly Isfahan. My father’s maternal aunt’s paternal uncle Mr. Shadaan Nashaadpuri was also a well-published poet.

Editor: What do you write?

Writer: I have written a story. It’s very brief. If you just have a look ... ?

Editor: OK. Leave it here. Attach a stamped envelope so that we could answer you back. In six months, I will let you know my opinion.

Writer (ashamedly): If you don’t mind ... It is a small piece. If you just listen to it and let me know your view now. It will take just two three minutes. If only you won’t mind ...

Editor (while checking his watch): OK, never mind! Tell me the title.

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¹ National literature.
² In the present context, *Ji* denotes respectful address/attention.
³ Lamp.

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Writer: Ji, even the title is unique – ‘Good Work’. It could also have been ‘Bahadur Allah Ditta’ but that I think seems a bit too old fashioned.

Editor: OK! OK! Read it.

Writer (reading): It must have been around 3 o’clock in the night. Everybody was sleeping like a log. There was no light in sight. Suddenly, from the fourth floor of a big building, huge flames of fire erupted. Somebody shouted, ‘Fire! Fire! Help! Help!’ It seemed a careless tenant had forgotten to put off the brazier. The clothes caught the spark and the fire started. Now, the fire was chasing him swiftly while the person was running ahead. Suddenly, the siren of the fire engine was heard. Fireman Allah Ditta was a middle-aged, enormously built man with a huge black moustache. He was an ex-soldier from Jhelum area. He stopped at the door. Pondered for a moment. And then, with a bang, he forced himself into the fire-engulfed room and got hold of that terrified man and brought him out. And then he spurted water over the fire and doused the flames. At this juncture, Peer Awlaad Baksh, the sweeper of the Fire Department, came forward and said, ‘Bravo! Bravo! The department is proud of you. We had expected this very display of bravery from you.’ And with a smile he added, ‘Look! The right side of your moustache is on fire.’ On hearing this, Bahadur Allah Ditta laughed and poured some water on his moustache as well. Far in the east, the brightness of the dawn started appearing in the sky.

Editor: The story is not bad. What was the title ‘Good Work’? This too is apt but certain places need careful reviewing. It’s sad to have inaccuracies in a story that is so good. Could you read it from the very start? Let me see what I can do.

Writer: Listen. ‘It was three o’clock in the night. Everybody was sleeping like a log.’

Editor (shaking his head): That won’t work. The word ‘everybody’ implies that even the policemen were sleeping and thus not doing their duty properly. No! No! This is not right. People will think that there is no proper arrangement of patrolling in our country. Change it and re-write it like this: ‘It was three o’clock in the night and not everybody was sleeping like a log.’

Writer (resisting): How can this happen? It’s a night scene. And everybody sleeps during the night.

Editor: Yes, you are right. Put it this way then: ‘In the city everybody was sleeping like a log but they were careful and vigilant too.’

Writer (aggressively): What did you say? They were sleeping and careful at the same time?

Editor: Yes! This seems a bit meaningless. OK! We can re-write it like this – ‘Some people were sleeping like a log. Some were careful and vigilant.’ OK! Let’s move on.

Writer (in a roaring voice): ‘There was no light in sight.’

Editor: Stop. You mean to say that in our country we make such bulbs which do not give out light at all.

Writer: No! No! I never meant that. It’s just that these bulbs are switched off at night.

Editor: My friend. Everybody is not intelligent enough to understand that point of yours. Most of them would conclude that in our country the quality of bulbs is not good and that we produce defective bulbs. Trust me; edit this thing out; plus what’s the point of having bulbs in a story which are not even giving out light.

Writer (nervously fidgets and reads on): ‘At once from the fourth floor of big building huge flames of fire erupted. A voice started crying, “Fire! Fire! Help! Help!”’

Editor: That means there was a commotion.

Writer: Yes.

Editor: You mean to say that in our paper we publicise the fact that even a trivial incident like this has the power to create commotion in our people which thereby makes them lose their senses? Hello, mister, this won’t work! This is the office of *Qaumi Adab* not ‘Surkh Aaftaab’.

Writer: But this is just a story – an effort of the imagination – I am just trying to describe an incident of fire.

Editor: In this story of yours you are writing not about a decent citizen who is well aware of his rights but about a person who makes commotion on such a trivial occasion as a fire. Had I been in your place I would’ve made this character utter some meaningful sentences perfectly in tune with national interests, instead of his feeble meaningless cry for help.

Writer: Like what?

Editor: Like he could’ve said ... ‘Oh, I have seen a lot of these kinds of fires in my life. Don’t worry! Will douse it in a minute.’

Or he could say, ‘There is no fire. This is all just propaganda of the conspirators.’

Writer (in a lifeless voice): But there was a fire.

Editor: Now that I am saying that there was no fire it means even if there was we don’t care the least about it. What is fire for the brave? In the words of the poet:

> When high-spirited intellectuals come to it,  
> They rip the oceans and draw rivers from mountains.

Writer: Anyway, just because you are saying I will do it; otherwise I’m not satisfied.

Editor: Why not? You move on. What’s the purpose of making this man cry so bitterly?

Writer (moving on): ‘It seemed that a careless tenant had forgotten to put off the brazier. The clothes caught the spark and the fire started.’

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4 Essentially, any magazine other than *Qaumi Adab* that does not portray and uphold national interests.

Editor: What tenant?

Writer: Laparwa. 

Editor: First thing first, even the arrangement of the word is not correct. ‘La’ is from Arabic and ‘parwa’ from Farsi or perhaps Hindi. OK! Let’s leave that aside; these days everyone is using language incorrectly but our paper can never ever promote such things as being careless. How can this happen? How can you write about a person who has forgotten to put off his brazier? You are setting a wrong example before our readers; they too would become reckless.

Writer (apologetically): I swear by God it was never my intention. I wrote about the brazier because without it the fire won’t erupt.

Editor: OK! Let’s say you are right. Let’s say the fire won’t erupt without it. How would that be harmful?

Writer: It wouldn’t have been harmful had it not erupted at all.

Editor: Well! Now you have come to the point. Now re-write it that way. Don’t talk at all about the brazier. That way even the description of fire won’t be required ... OK! Read ahead. Omit the middle part and come straight to the character of the fireman.

Writer: ‘Fireman Allah Ditta was a middle-aged, enormously built man with a huge black moustache. He was an ex-soldier from Jhelum area.’

Editor: Wonderful! What a way to write it. Even my area falls in the district of Jhelum. All the people from that region are brave. In the First World War, the 15th Battalion of Punjab regiment ...

Writer (without paying attention to the editor, keeps reading): ‘He stopped at the door. Pondered for a moment.’

Editor: Me! Pondering? No! No! Don’t make the fireman think. His job is just to douse the fire.

Writer: This makes the story gripping.

Editor: Even if the story becomes gripping, so what? It makes the character of the fireman weak. To add to it, now that we have entirely deleted the description of the fire, why is it necessary to talk about the fireman?

Writer: But how can the exchange between fireman Allah Ditta and sweeper Peer Awlaad Baksh take place then?

Editor: You can make these conversations occur in their office too.

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5 Careless.

Writer (reads): At this juncture, Peer Awlaad Baksh, the sweeper of the Fire Department, came forward and said, ‘Bravo! Bravo! The department is proud of you. We had expected this very display of bravery from you.’ And with a smile he added, ‘Look! The right side of your moustache is on fire.’ On hearing this, Bahadur Allah Ditta laughed and poured some water on his moustache as well. Far in the east, the brightness of the dawn started appearing in the sky.

Editor: Is this description necessary?

Writer: What description?

Editor: The description of the burning of the moustache.

Writer: I have written this only to add a comic element to the story. To show that this man is so selflessly absorbed in his work that he is entirely unaware of his moustache on fire.

Editor: Trust me; cut this whole description out from the story. We have even deleted the description of the fire from the story. When the building is not on fire, what’s the purpose of setting fire to someone’s moustache?

Writer (changing subject): Comic effect!

Editor: That’ll still be there. When do people laugh? They laugh when they are not in distress. Hasn’t the deletion of fire from the story already brought comfort? Yes, it already has and everyone will be happy now. Everyone would laugh. Now, read me the story from the very start. Let me see how it has developed.

Writer: Yes, listen. It was three o’clock in the night. Some people were sleeping like a log. Some were careful and vigilant. At once a voice started crying, ‘There is no fire. This is all just propaganda of the conspirators.’ Fireman Allah Ditta was a middle-aged, enormously built man with a huge black moustache. He was an ex-soldier from Jhelum area. At this juncture, Peer Awlaad Baksh, the sweeper of the Fire Department, came forward and said, ‘Bravo! Bravo! The department is proud of you. We had expected this very display of bravery from you’. On hearing this, Bahadur Allah Ditta laughed and poured some water on his moustache as well. Far in the east, the brightness of the dawn started appearing in the sky.

Editor: Now it’s good! Now, the story is flawless, devoid of any mistakes and the monthly Qaumi Adab will publish it with all enthusiasm and pride. No! No! There’s no need to thank me. It’s the rightful duty of Qaum-i-Adab to support and boost up the confidence of new writers.