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THE TROUBLED AIR

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BY IRWIN SHAW

author of the best-seller

THE YOUNG LIONS

THE TROUBLED AIR

Irwin Shaw's theme in this novel is developed through the activities of America's greatest media of mass communication and entertainment, radio and television. TV director, Clement Archer, is ordered by his commercial sponsor to dismiss several members of his programme because they are suspected of political affiliations of a subversive nature – in short they are charged with being "Reds". Shaw, author of the best-selling *The Young Lions*, dramatically illuminates the dilemma of men of intelligence in a society which has become almost frantic with fear and uncertainty.

"Written with such passion, and at such a pace, that as the action nears its climax the excitement becomes hard to bear" – *S. Times.*

To MARTIN

The Troubled Air

IRWIN SHAW

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Any similarity or apparent connection between the characters in this story and actual persons, whether alive or dead, is purely coincidental

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CHAPTER ONE

THE clock on the acoustically perfect wall moved towards nine-thirty, nibbling at Thursday night. The scarred Negro in the cashmere jacket peered through his glasses at the pages in his hand and drawled a line that had seemed funny to everyone in the studio at rehearsal. Fifteen million people laughed. Or were supposed to laugh. Or perhaps didn't laugh. There would be repercussions from this later in the year.

In the control room, Clement Archer, behind the soundproof glass, waved his arm to indicate that time was running out. Loyally, on the floor in front of the microphone, the next actor, Victor Herres, spoke a little more quickly than usual and bit crisply into other people's cues and the lost seconds were won back from the electric clock.

Momentarily victorious over Thursday, Archer leaned back in his chair and squinted at the actors on the other side of the glass. Eloquent fish in a clear aquarium, they swam on the element of time up to and away from the nourishment of the microphones, their voices and the sound of musical instruments from another room blended delicately by the ear-honed engineer who sat at the control board next to Archer.

The music swelled slowly and the conductor was putting more trumpet into it than Pokorny, the composer, had wanted. Archer was certain that Pokorny, sitting behind him on the edge of a chair, would make a face at this point. He turned and looked. Pokorny was making a face. Pokorny never hid anything. The loose fat jowls, the little pale eyes behind the European glasses, the pink bow mouth immediately reflected every thought that passed through Pokorny's head. Right now he was making a complicated face, in which he was trying to announce to the world that he was not responsible for the sounds that the butcher of a conductor was drawing from the orchestra, that American musicians were too loud, that he had warned everyone, had fought and as usual lost, because he was a foreigner.

Archer smiled and turned back to the programme. He liked the music. He rubbed his bald head reflectively. He had lost his hair by the time he was twenty-five and in the process had developed a nervous habit of touching the top of his head,

as though to confirm the bad news a dozen times an hour. The disaster was now twenty years in the past and confirmation was history, but the sorrowful, investigating movement remained.

The music died down and the closing scene of the programme swept smoothly towards the finish. Across the studio, in a small gallery behind another window, the sponsor and O'Neill, the agency man, sat quietly. The sponsor had a dignified expression on his face. He didn't look happy, but he didn't look restless. I will settle for dignity, Archer thought, and listened to Herres making the long final speech.

The scene ended, the music swelled up, Pokorny made another, less complicated face, the announcer praised the product generously, but with decorum. The sponsor looked dignified; the closing theme roared up and faded; the engineer twisted a dial. A pleasant silence filled the control room for a few seconds. Archer blinked and stood up as the actors in the studio broke away from the microphones and started to talk among themselves. Archer patted the engineer's shoulder. "You were lovely, Johnny," he said. "Never, in many long years of listening, have I been so moved by an engineer. Such delicacy with the left hand, such virility with the strings, such control with the Radio Actor's Guild."

Brewer grinned.

On the floor, Herres was looking up at Archer in the control room and invitingly lifting his hand as though he had a glass in it.

"The actor is making a significant gesture," Archer said, nodding to Herres. "Would you say that was beer or bourbon in his hand?" He started out of the room, passing Barbante who was still sitting slumped in his chair, tapping a cigarette on a heavy gold case. Barbante was the writer for the programme and as usual, at these moments, he had a derisive and challenging look on his face. He was a small, thick man with a long dark head. He dressed like a diplomat and always exuded a musky smell of expensive toilet water. Archer liked to avoid Barbante after a show.

"The script worked out very well," Archer said, sniffing the perfume distastefully. "Didn't you think so, Dom?"

"Oh, I thought it was peachy," Barbante said. "Just peachy." Sir Arthur Wing Pinero twirled twice in his grave in envy.

"All personnel," Archer said, staring down at Barbante, disliking him, "are hereby advised that, as of this date, all scripts are to be scorned on the writer's own time."

"You asked me, amigo," Barbante said, smiling up, "and I told you. I thought it was peachy. So sad, so funny, so brainless. I may ask for a raise next week."

"Mr. Archer, Mr. Archer." It was Pokorny, struggling into a trench coat behind him. Archer recognized the warning wail of complaint in Pokorny's voice and sighed as he turned to face him. Pokorny had on a long wool muffler and a stiff, reddish tweed suit with trousers that were too long for him. The trench coat was almost pink and was stained with grease over the round bulge of Pokorny's stomach. With it, Pokorny wore a black velour hat, snapped down all around over his ong, thin, grey hair. Fully dressed, he looked as though he ad been turned out by a demented governess who had an ncle who played in a military band. He came very close to rcher and grabbed his arm. "Mr. Archer, in the most spectful terms, it is necessary to talk about the insolence of ie conductor." He had a singing Viennese accent and he ever blinked his eyes and Archer always had the feeling that e wanted to sit on your lap when he talked about his music.

"I thought the score was fine, Manfred," Archer said ildly, being polite and using Pokorny's full name because he w Pokorny hated to be called Mannie.

"Of course, it is probably not in my place to say," Pokorny m oed Archer's sleeve more tightly. "But I feel it is my m to tell you that every value was one hundred per cent ph ng." Pokorny's mouth quivered moistly. "I merely put my- on record. The conductor refuses to talk to me, so I advise i – it should be sharp, it should be hard like diamonds for proper values. And what do we get – a flood of senti- ntality, a Niagara of whipped cream, a Rhine of molasses."

Archer smiled. Gently he withdrew his sleeve. "I know, anfred. You're right. I'll do something about it for next eek. Depend upon me."

Pokorny bowed. "I am in your debt," he said formally. He picked up a brief-case stuffed with musical notepaper and went out. Talent, Archer thought, watching the retreating, ighteous back, sometimes assumes alarming shapes.

He went through the door and into the studio. Barbante owed him, holding a soft black overcoat over his arm. rbante strode purposefully over to Miss Wilson, who was prettiest girl on the programme and who had been with them for only a week. She was talking in a corner to a character woman, pretending not to be waiting for Barbante. That size, Archer thought with a flick of envy, that face, you'd

never think they'd wait so anxiously for him. Barbante, the fragrant bachelor. There must be something about him that only women can detect. At any distance up to a mile. And they do it on instruments when the visibility is bad. Archer watched the girl's nervous, surrendering smile as Barbante came up to her, and turned away, feeling unpleasant.

Alice Weller approached him and he arranged his face. You had to be gentle with Alice because she was unlucky and because in the last two years she had suddenly lost her looks.

"How was I tonight?" Alice was asking softly, peering near-sightedly at him. She was wearing a terrible hat that sat on her head like a breadboard. "Did I do what you asked in the second scene?" she asked in her low, rescued voice.

"You were wonderful, darling," Archer said. "As usual."

"Good." Alice flushed and her hands moved with aimless pleasure over her bag. "You are nice to say that." Then, trying to keep the pleading out of her voice, "Is there a chance you're going to need me again next week, Clement?"

"Sure," Archer said heartily. "I'm almost positive. I'll give you a ring. Maybe we'll have lunch."

"Oh," Alice said, "that would be awfully nice. I look forward to it . . ."

Archer leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Good night, darling," he said, and she flushed again as he walked away.

"Gambling," Herres was saying as Archer approached him, "gambling is the curse of the working man." He was matching quarters with Stanley Atlas. "I'll be with you in a minute, Clement. I have him lined up for the knockout now."

"Stanley," Archer said to the Negro actor, who was digging into his pocket for more coins, "you were slow again tonight."

Atlas took two quarters out and said, mildly, "Was I?"

"You know you were," Archer said, irritated with him. "You're milking laughs to death."

Atlas grinned. The scars on his cheek looked like greyish quotation marks when he smiled. The scars were surprising on him. He had a quiet, secret face and it was hard to think of him going anywhere that people would be likely to fight with razors. He seemed slight in his well-cut clothes, and his speech, unless he affected an accent, was clear of any trace of his Tampa childhood. "My public expects it, Clem," he said, playing with the quarters. "The voice of the dark, lazy South. The sluggish rivers, the willows on the bank, the mules on the dusty roads . . ."

"When was the last time you saw a mule?" Archer asked.

Atlas grinned again. "1929. In a moving picture."

"Anyway," Archer said, annoyed with the near dark face over the white collar, "from now on, when I ask you to go faster, go faster."

"Yassuh, Boss," Atlas said. "Yassuh, Boss, you bet, Boss." He turned back to Herres and lost the two quarters.

O'Neill came through the door, buttoning his overcoat. O'Neill's coat was lined with mink, the gift of an actress wife who had a lot of money. He sometimes wore a derby hat. Archer admired O'Neill's courage in wearing a mink-lined coat, especially with a derby hat. Right now, O'Neill had his serious face on, which was incongruous, like a beard on an alderman.

"Ah," said Herres, "the mink-lined O'Neill."

"Hello, Vic," O'Neill said. "Stanley, Clement. Nice show tonight. The sponsor was pleased."

"Tonight," said Archer, "we die happy."

"Clement and I're joining my wife for a drink," Herres said. "Come along with us?"

"Thanks," said O'Neill. "Not tonight. I'm busy." He turned to Archer. "Clem, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Be with you in a minute," Archer said to Herres and followed O'Neill across the studio to a corner. The studio was almost empty now and the sound man was seated at the piano, idly playing scraps of songs. "La Vie en Rose," the sound man played, forgetting the noises he was paid to make professionally, the sound of rain, the sound of footsteps on a gravel path, the sound of motor-car accidents. Then he switched to a song about a warm, non-existent island in the southern ocean. He didn't play well, but he played with feeling, and you could tell the sound man longed for distant, quiet and melancholy places.

O'Neill stopped and turned towards Archer. "Listen, Clem," O'Neill whispered hoarsely, "there's a little party somebody's giving the sponsor and he wants you to come."

"Sure," said Archer, wondering why O'Neill had to cross the room and whisper this information. "We'll just go to Louis' and pick up Nancy Herres and we'll come along later. What's the address?"

O'Neill shook his head. "No," he whispered. "Herres isn't invited."

"Oh," said Archer. "Let's skip it, then."

"The sponsor said he'd like to talk to you."

"Any time from nine to five," Archer said. "Tell the

sponsor I'm an unpredictable artist after business hours."

"OK," said O'Neill, visibly controlling his temper. "I'll tell him you've got a headache."

"Lies," said Archer, "are the foundation of all decent social relations. You'll make somebody a wonderful hostess some day, Emmet."

O'Neill didn't answer. He was staring at Archer, his dark blue eyes baffled and friendly. He reminded Archer of a bulldog struggling to communicate with the human race, walled in by the lack of language.

"I'm sorry, Emmet," Archer said. "But I promised Vic."

"Sure," O'Neill nodded vigorously. "Don't worry about it. Will you drop into the office tomorrow? There's a couple of things I have to talk to you about."

Archer sighed. "Friday's my day of rest, Emmet," he said. "Can't it wait?"

"Not really. It's important. Say eleven o'clock . . ."

"Eleven-thirty. I expect to be sleepy tomorrow morning."

"Eleven-thirty," O'Neill said, putting on his hat. "And don't call me up and say you can't make it."

"O'Neill, you're an exploiter of labour." Archer peered at O'Neill curiously. "What's so important about it?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow." O'Neill waved and went out without saying good-night to Herres or Atlas. Archer took out his pipe and filled it slowly. Momentarily he wondered what O'Neill was bothered about. He lit the pipe and took a long pull.

The sound man sat at the piano and worked at a complicated arrangement of "Some Enchanted Evening". He made it sound mournful, as though every time he had been in love he had been jilted.

Archer shook his head, dismissing O'Neill and his problems until eleven-thirty the next morning. He picked up his hat and coat and went over to Herres, who had taken all of Atlas' quarters by now and was reading a newspaper, waiting.

"OK," Archer said, "the bar-room detail is ready for action."

"Mercy killing is the question of the day," Herres said, tapping the newspaper. He got into his coat and they started out of the studio, waving good-bye to Atlas, who was waiting for a friend. "Doctors with air-bubbles, husbands with bread-knives, daughters with police revolvers. You never saw such violent mercy in all your days. It opens up completely new fields of saintliness. At the trial of the war criminals after

the next war, the euthanasia society will conduct the defence. The hydrogen bomb was dropped in a temporary access of pity. Saved whole populations from the pains of cancer and living in general. Airtight. What jury would convict?"

Archer grinned. "I knew that finally somebody would prove how dangerous air can be," he said. "Memo to all radio executives – treat air with caution."

They got into the lift and plunged twenty storeys, in a low howl of wind.

Outside the building, New York was deceptively clean and the lighted shop windows glowed down the dark avenue. Taxis swept past in the light traffic and you could almost taste fine crystals of salt from the rivers in the air. It was still early and Archer felt that there was a great deal that might be done with the evening.

He started walking uptown, with Herres striding beside him. They were both tall men, and although Archer was almost ten years older than Herres, he walked briskly, with a healthy, solid way of planting his feet. Their heels echoed in rhythm against the shut buildings and they had the street to themselves as they went north, into the wind.

They walked in silence for a block. Then Herres said, "What's wrong with O'Neill? He looked as though he'd been bitten by an ingénue."

Archer grinned. You had to be very careful with Victor. He didn't seem to be noticing anything, but he took everything in, and was barometer-sensitive to the slightest changes in the emotional climate. "I don't know," Archer said. "Perhaps the sponsor sneezed during the commercials. Maybe a hat-check girl rubbed his mink the wrong way."

"Mink," said Herres. "The Class A uniform. To be worn for parades, court-martials and when leaving the post. Do you think O'Neill'll vote Republican now that he's so warmly dressed?"

"I doubt it," Archer said gravely. "The entire O'Neill family suffers from tennis elbow from pulling so hard and so long on the Democratic levers on the voting machines of a dozen assembly districts."

"For he's a jolly good fellow," Herres said, "with his balls in a sponsor's sling."

Archer smiled, but he felt the click of criticism in his brain. Ever since Herres had come back from the war he had salted his speech constantly with barracks images, no matter who was listening. Archer, who felt uneasy when he heard profanity,

had protested once, mildly, and Herres had grinned and said, "You must excuse me, Professor. I'm a dirty man, but I got my vocabulary in the service of my country. Patriotism is a four-letter word. Anyway, I never say anything you can't find in any good circulating library."

This was true. It was also true that most of the people Archer knew spoke loosely, in the modern manner, and Archer always had an uncomfortable sense of being spinsterish and old-fashioned when his inner censor made these private objections. But he had an undefined sense that when Herres spoke in front of him in the tones of a sergeant's mess, a hidden flaw in their friendship was being momentarily exposed.

Archer shook his head, impatient with his reflection. Probably, he thought, it's some hangover from the schoolroom, the inextinguishable core of schoolteacher in him, everlastingly herding phantom students into proper channels of deportment. Consciously, he resolved not to allow himself to be annoyed the next time.

"I had a thought," Archer said, "while watching you tonight, Victor."

"Name it," said Herres. "Name the thought."

"I thought you were a very good actor."

"Mention me in dispatches," Herres said, grinning, "the next time you go up to Division."

"Too good for radio."

"Treason," Herres said gravely. "Biting the hand that murders you."

"You never have to extend yourself," Archer went on seriously, looking into a bookshop window. The window had a display of books from the French, all celebrating despair in bright, attractive covers. Collaboration, guilt and torture, imported especially for Madison Avenue, at three dollars a copy. "Everything's so easy for you, you win every race under wraps."

"Good blood lines," Herres said. "My sire was a well-known stud in Midwestern stables. His get took many firsts. In the sprints at second-class meetings."

"Aren't you curious to see what you could do against tougher competition?"

Herres looked thoughtfully down a side street. "Why?" he asked. "Are you?"

"Yes," Archer said. "On the stage. Where you could be fully used. You're a good type. You're still young-looking.

And you've got a simple, open face, with the necessary touch of brutality in it for the older trade."

Herres chuckled. "Hamlet 1950," he said, "wearing his major H."

"Listening to you reading Barbante's silly lines," Archer said, "I get a sense of waste. Like seeing a pile driver used for thumbtacks."

Herres smiled. "Think how comfortable it is," he said, "for the pile driver to be asked only to handle thumbtacks. Last forever and be as good as new a hundred years from date of sale."

"Think about it, dear boy," Archer said, as they turned down Fifty-sixth Street.

"Dear boy," said Herres. "I won't."

They smiled at each other, and Herres held the door of Louis' bar open for him. They went in, out of the cold.

The first drink was fine, after the day's work and the brisk walk. Nancy hadn't come yet and they sat at the bar, on the high stools, rolling the cold glasses in their hands, enjoying watching the bar-tender handle the bottles and the ice.

Woodrow Burke was sitting by himself around the curve of the bar, staring into his drink. He looked drunk and Archer tried to keep from catching his eye. Burke had been a famous correspondent during the war. He was always being spectacularly caught in surrounded towns and burning aeroplanes and because of this speciality his price had gone very high in those days. Since the war he had become a news commentator on the radio and his washboard voice, hoarse with criticism and disdain, had for a while been the disturbing incidental music at dinner tables all through the country. He had been fired suddenly over a year ago (his enemies said it was because he was a fellow-traveller and he said it was because he was an honest man) and since that time had sat in bars, deciding to divorce his wife, and announcing that free speech was being throttled in America. He was a fattish, pale young man, with bold, worried dark eyes, and with all that weight he must have landed very hard the time he had to bail out of the aeroplane. During the war he had a reputation for being very brave. He had grown much older in the last year and his tolerance for alcohol seemed to have diminished seriously.

He looked up from his drink and saw Archer and Herres. He waved and Archer saw the gesture out of the corner of his eye, but pretended not to. Carefully, Burke got down from his stool and walked, steadily but slowly, around the curve of the

bar towards them, holding his drink stiffly, to keep it from spilling.

"Clem, Vic," Burke came up behind them, "we who are about to die, salute thee. Have a drink."

Archer and Herres swung around in their chairs. "Hi, Woodie," Archer said, very heartily, to make up for the fact that he was sorry Burke had come over. "How's it going?"

"I am sinking with all hands on board," Burke said soberly. "How's it going with you?"

"Fair," Archer said. "I'll probably live at least until the next payment on the income tax is due."

"Those bastards," Burke said, sipping his whisky, "they're still after me for 1945. The Vosges Mountains," he said obscurely. "That's where I was in 1945." He stared gloomily at himself in the mirror. His collar was rumpled and his tie was damp from spilled whisky. "Were you there?" He turned pugnaciously on Herres.

"Where?" Herres asked.

"The Vosges Mountains."

"No, Woodie."

"Old Purple-Heart Vic," Burke said, patting Herres on the shoulder. "You were a good boy, they told me. Never saw for myself, but I heard you were a good boy. But watch out now, Vic, the Big Wound is coming up now."

"Sure, Woodie," Herres said. "I'll take good care of myself."

"The wounds of peace," Burke said, his prominent eyes angry and troubled. "Jagged and with a high percentage of fatalities. Invisible bursts at treetop level on Fifth Avenue. The Big One. No medals for it and no points towards discharge, either. Watch out for the big one, though."

"I sure will, Woodie," Herres said.

"How about you?" Burke swung his head and aimed it at Archer.

"How about me what?" Archer said mildly.

"Where were you?"

"No place, Woodie," Archie said. "I was a continental limits man."

"Well," said Burke, generously forgiving him, "somebody had to stay home." He sipped his drink noisily. "My big mistake," he said, "was not being kicked out of Yugoslavia when I had the chance." He nodded, confirming himself.

Archer kept silent, hoping that Burke would notice that he was not being encouraged to talk. But Burke was now on his

nightly subject and refused to stop. "I left of my own free will," Burke went on, "instead of being invited out, and I didn't write that Tito raped a nun every day before breakfast, and the hand of suspicion was laid on me. I said what I had to say as an honest man, and the bastards got me. Powerful agencies at work, Archer, throttling the means of communication. Sinister and powerful agencies," he whispered over his glass, "weeding out the honest men. Don't laugh, Archer, don't laugh. Somewhere, somebody has your name on a list. Tree-top level." He drained his whisky and put the glass down on the bar. He looked shabbier and more lonesome without a glass in his hand. "Archer," he said, facing around, "can you lend me a thousand dollars?"

"Now, Woodie . . ." Archer began.

"OK." Burke waved his hands. "No reason for you to lend me any money. Hardly know me. Bar-room bore, with his credit running out, always telling the same old story of everybody's life. Forget it. Shouldn't've asked. It's just that I happen to need a thousand dollars."

"I can let you have three hundred," Archer said. He was surprised at the figure as he said it. He had meant to offer a hundred, but three hundred came out.

"Thanks," Burke said calmly. "That's nice of you. I need a thousand, but three hundred helps, I suppose."

Herres turned his back on them, and said something to the man on his left, delicately trying not to overhear Burke.

"You couldn't let me have it now, could you?" Burke peered uncertainly at Archer. "Tonight? I could use three hundred in cash tonight."

"Now, Woodie," Archer said. "I don't carry money like that on me. You know that."

"Thought I'd ask," Burke mumbled. "No harm in asking. People carry all kinds of things on them these days. Inflation, maybe, the general feeling of insecurity, always being ready to cut and run, if necessary."

"I'm not running any place," Archer said.

"No?" Burke nodded soberly. "Who knows?" He put his face closer to Archer. "Maybe you have it at home," he whispered. "In the old safe behind the picture on the dining-room wall. I'd be happy to go downtown with you and wait. Pay the taxi myself."

Archer laughed. "Woodie, you're drunk. I'll put the cheque in the mail tomorrow morning."

"Special delivery," Burke said.

"Special delivery."

"You're sure you can't make it a thousand?" Burke asked loudly.

"Woodie, why don't you go home and get a good night's sleep?" said Archer.

"The minute a man lends you a buck," Burke said angrily, "he begins to give you advice. Traditional relationship of creditor to debtor. Archer, I thought you'd be above that. I'll go home and go to sleep when I'm damn well ready." He turned and started back towards his place at the end of the bar. After he had gone two steps, he stopped and reversed himself. "You said Special Delivery, remember," he said threateningly.

"I remember," Archer said, trying not to be angry.

"OK." Burke turned again and walked, without swaying, back to his stool. He sat down, very straight. "Joe," he said to the bartender, "Bell's twelve-year-old. Double. With water."

That's a hell of an expensive drink for a man to order in front of somebody who's just loaned him three hundred dollars, Archer thought. Then he heard Herres whispering harshly at him, "Why did you give that scrounging wind-bag that money?"

Archer shrugged as he swung around to face Herres. "I don't know," he said honestly. "I'm as surprised as you are."

"You'll never get it back," Herres said. "He'll never get a job again, and he'll be too drunk to hold one if he does."

"Why, Vic," Archer said, "I thought he was a friend of yours."

"The only friend he has is Haig and Haig. You've just kissed three hundred bucks farewell," Herres said. "I hope you can afford it."

"Mr. Herres." It was the head waiter, standing behind them. "Mrs. Herres is on the telephone."

"Thanks, Albert," Herres said, swinging off his chair. "Probably she wants to say she will only be three days late for cocktails." He followed the head waiter towards the phone in the back room.

Archer watched his friend stride easily and gracefully past the tables. He noticed with amusement that, as usual, two or three ladies looked away from their escorts to examine Herres as he passed. One hard-faced woman in a veil got out her handbag mirror and surreptitiously followed Herres' progress over her shoulder. What went on in women's minds,