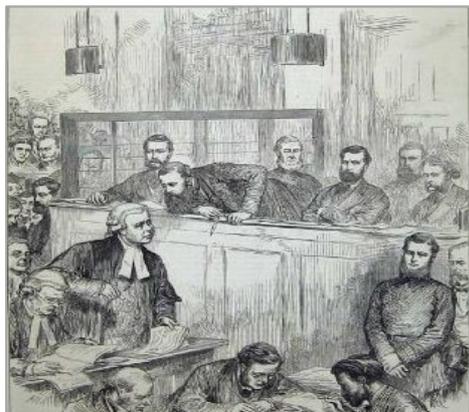


Store Manager in Court for Fraud 1931

"Living Beyond his Means"



Before the Wiltshire Court of Quarter Sessions at Devizes on Tuesday, Leonard Victor Besley, (32), who was until recently manager of the Tisbury branch of the International Tea Company's Stores, was charged with a long series of frauds, to all of which he pleaded guilty.

The accused was indicted upon some 24 counts collectively; they all had to do with frauds which he had committed in relation to the monies of the Company while in its employ. It took the Clerk of the Peace some time to read the long list of counts, to which the accused listened with bowed head, his eyes meanwhile being fixed upon the floor of the dock.

The prosecution was in the hands of Mr R Holt and Mr F E Tucker was briefed for the defence.

The defendant, who surrendered to his bail, was committed from Tisbury Court at the end of November and the facts are, therefore, well known.

Epitomising them from the point of view of the prosecution, Mr Holt said the defendant had been employed as manager of the International Tea Company's branch, and except for his war service, had been in the firm's employ since 1913. He was apprenticed to it, and went back to the service soon after his war demobilisation so that practically all his business career had been spent with the firm. He was paid a salary of £3 15s a week in addition to which living accommodation was provided as a part of his emoluments.

As a manager he was in complete charge of the financial affairs of the branch, but there were many checks kept upon his activities, which Mr Holt detailed, submitting that in spite of all the safeguards, the defendant was apparently able to defeat them. Besley kept all the books of the branch, except those kept by the cashier, and at the end of the day she handed over her cash to the manager, for which he signed, so that so far as the cashier was concerned, her transactions were correct. The frauds were not always brought about by the same methods. With regard to small accounts paid by a Mrs Wood to the defendant, he put them into his pocket instead of paying them to the Company's account, although they were shown as paid.

A Different Method

On another count, a different method was worked. The accused was Secretary to the British Legion Club, which bought cigarettes, and so forth from the Company, which, in this particular case came to £13 11s 10d. As Secretary to the Legion, he took the cash for that amount and gave his personal cheque to the Company for only £12 5s 4d, which left a balance against him of £1 6s 6d. When it came to the question of the receipt, the defendant had relinquished the Secretaryship of the Legion, and the new Secretary found that the receipt for the £13 was signed not by the cashier, but by the accused.

With regard to the amounts concerned in Counts from four to 14, the defendant had a different method because they were sums of money paid by the Tisbury Union for supplies from the Company and were paid by cheque. Defendant received the cheques as manager, but instead of retaining them, he would take out the cash for the equivalent amount of the Tisbury Union cheque and put the money in his pocket.

Health Insurance Cards

Mr Holt went on and showed other instances in which the defendant had defrauded the Company, and the methods by which he did it, including the manipulation of the National Insurance cards, showing that when the defendant was requested to sign a declaration that he had stamped the cards to date and kept them in a safe place he did so in the affirmative, whereas they were not stamped for very long periods. For years defendant had failed to stamp certain of the cards; he had not only robbed the Company in that respect, but the deductions had been made from the employees' wages. The total came to over £170, and that was the amount which the National Health Department was now claiming from the International Tea Company, up to date, for card which had not been stamped. The Chairman: What brought him to this? Gambling? Mr Holt: We do not know. It has been going on for a long time. I understand he has one little girl, who a year ago was taken ill, but this has been going on for longer than that. So far as we know, there is no cause for it.

The Defence

Mr Tucker, addressing the Court for the defence, said it was a very unfortunate case, and a very sad one. there was no doubt the young man before the Court, until he began doing these things, not only bore a good character in the ordinary sense in which people were said to bear good characters in criminal cases, which meant they had not been convicted, or had not been found out before, but he had actually a most excellent character and credentials.

As Mr Holt had told them, the defendant entered the service of the company when he was 14 year old, in 1912, and at the outbreak of war in 1914, when only 16 years old, he at once enlisted, and served throughout the war, during which he got excellent characters and credentials. He (counsel) had the character which was given the defendant by Lieutenant Dauntsey of the Royal East Kent Mounted Rifles, under who he served. the officer said he had pleasure in bearing testimony to the general character and ability of Corporal Belsey and after testifying to his efficiency, spoke of him as a hard working, industrious man.

After the defendant's discharge from the Army on the 18th February 1919, he went to Chatham where he worked in the dockyard, and when he left he was given the certificate of the Admiralty, showing that he was a skilled labourer, that his character was very good, that his quality of service was very good, and that his discharge was due to a reduction in the number of employees there.

Having served as he did during the war, and for a year afterwards in the dockyards, he returned to the employment of the International Tea Company, who took him on again. He was then only 21 years of age, and was at once placed in the highly responsible position of manager at the Company's branch at Tisbury. He started in that post with a salary of £4 a week, which was subsequently reduced to £3 15s a week, with a house, or living accommodation, at the age of 21 years. He was instructed that the defendant had to handle something like £15,000 a year, which passed through his hands. That, of course, was a most responsible position for a young man, up till then a capable and enterprising young man, though, of course, for what he did in this case there was no excuse.

The inspections which the International Tea Company Stores carried out must have been a pure farce. The inspectors visited the branch two or three times a month, and for them not to have ever discovered what was going on was surprising. He (counsel) did not suggest that it was any excuse for what the defendant did. What he did was the simplest thing possible. It was done every day in such cases, when people took money, and passed cheques in for a corresponding amount - cheques which had been paid, but which were not entered up as having been paid. One would think that men with an elementary knowledge, who came for the purpose of inspecting the books, would be able to discover what was going on.

It was the same with regard to the National Insurance stamps in respect of unemployment cards; the Government inspectors came, and gave evidence, but how they did not find out that the cards were not stamped he (Mr Tucker) did not know. Once the defendant had started to go wrong in those ways, he found it so easy; if only it had been found out before, and he had stopped when it was going on on only a small scale, he would probably have "come up against it before" and probably the Court would have been able to deal with him in a manner different from that in which he could be dealt with that day. The thing would have been stopped; he would have got a shock, but it would not have gone on until it had reached the dimensions it had now. It began with the failure to stamp the National Insurance cards. As it was often found, people with the best of intentions in the world did not stamp their cards actually at the time; some put it off for six months, or to the end of the year, and when they last used the money which had accumulated in respect of that fund, they found they could not pay it back, or thought it would not be discovered, consequently they went on doing it again. The other frauds were more recent, in 1928, 1929 and 1930.

With regard to what made him do it, said Mr Tucker, it was not what "made him do it" but what led up to his doing it - that, in 1924 he married, and in 1927 a child was born. It had a serious accident in May 1929, as a result of which the defendant had to take the child up to London to be seen by a specialist very frequently; it had to be x-rayed, to have sea-water treatment, and this, with the expense of complications, cost about £100.

Then, in 1925, the defendant found that the trade at the shop began to fall off, and with a view to increasing it and getting the custom back again, he started to engage in the social activities of Tisbury. He became secretary to the local branch of the British Legion, and work of that kind; he undertook a certain amount of hospitality and activities of that sort which was beyond the standard at which he could live up to. With a salary of only £4 a week and a wife and child to maintain, once could not do much of that kind of thing, and, no doubt, the defendant became extravagant, having regard to his salary. There was no suggestion, and never had been throughout the case, that the money was spent for any other purpose, in riotous living, or anything of that kind. He had always been a "decent" young man; he started living beyond his means, and that was all. The cause of it was that he endeavoured by that means to make himself popular to push his business and then he had the misfortune with regard to his child. That was what caused him to put his hand in the till, which he found was so easy.

Everyone spoke well of him; he would not be in the business position he had been unless he was a sharp, enterprising and able young fellow. Mr Tucker went on to quote from a letter by the Vicar of Tisbury, in which he said that these incidents were an altogether contradiction of the estimate placed upon the defendant's character in private and public life. He was a local leader for many years and an energetic worker, respected and thought much of by everybody.

Counsel went on to say that since this affair happened, the defendant had been working for his brother at Gravesend, who was a grocer, who was willing to take him back into his service after the expiration of any punishment the Court might think fit to inflict. It was no good trying to minimise what the accused had done, counsel added. It was no good talking about it being a first offence in the ordinary acceptance of those words, but he emphasised the fact that it was the first time the defendant had been before a Court, so that they did not know what effect lenient treatment might have upon his future.

The Court's Decision

The Chairman said the Court was desirous of giving every possible consideration it could to what Mr Tucker had said about the defendant's past. It was very sad for the Justices to have such a man before them pleading guilty to those charges. It was perfectly true; the defendant was in a very responsible position when he started at the age of 21 years as manager of a branch business, which had annual takings to the amount of £15,000. But, on the other hand, his war record was extremely good, and it might well have been thought that he had been in an already responsible position to serve his country as he had done during the five years of the terrible experience which the war was.

He (the Chairman) did not know that there was anything to be said against those who trusted people who came through the war with a good record; it would be regarded as a responsible position for a man of 21 years, when he continued in his employment, as during the war, there was nothing whatever of this kind. But there was no doubt he became a dishonest employee, cheating his employers over a series of three years at least. The Court was anxious to make the sentence as light as it could, and the last thing he (the Chairman) wanted to do was to give him a homily about his conduct. Defendant knew what he had done as well as he (the Chairman) did.

The lightest sentence the Court could pass for the very serious frauds the defendant had committed was one of imprisonment in the second division for 12 months.

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