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VICE SQUAD CONFIDENTIAL CHILE ACUNA, DECEMBER 1930-FEBRUARY 1931 CHAPTER 71

BY JAY MAEDER / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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SUPREME COURT JUSTICE Joseph Force Crater remained very much missing in the final weeks of 1930, and Judge Samuel Seabury's corruption probe remained very actively a nettling nuisance to city officialdom, when 31-year-old Chile Mapocha Acuna, a stool pigeon by trade, came forward to rat out a pack of cops who had double-crossed him. Had he ever once pretended to noble idealism, his story would have rung less true; instead, plainly just a lowlife with an ax to grind, he made a thoroughly credible witness. Overnight, the little weasel ignited the worst police scandals in more than 30 years. Police Commissioner Edward Mulrooney sat ashen and aghast as the details spilled out. Even Mayor Jimmy Walker, for once, refrained from cracking wise. It was not only that city magistrates were buying their seats, accepting automobiles and other gifts, doing private business with the lawyers and bondsmen who came before them. The courts were in open cahoots with vice detectives, Acuna said, shaking down prostitutes and sending them to prison if they didn't pay up. Often the women weren't even professionals; he had, he confessed, helped cops frame dozens of innocents just to keep the arrest numbers up. Alas for the cops, Acuna had a sharp memory. Names, dates, chapters, verses. His yarn held up. The town was revolted. "It is not a pleasant thought," said the Daily News, "that the Police Department, which produces heroes who shoot it out with armed and desperate thugs, can also produce a few snakes.

" In open court, Chile Acuna reviewed 70 lined-up officers and pointed out more than two dozen as men with whom he had worked the predatory racket. All were suspended at once, as Seabury's staff meanwhile began freeing victimized women from the Bedford reformatory. By Christmas, six of them, personally pardoned by "deeply disturbed and greatly incensed" Gov. Franklin Roosevelt, were ready to testify. At the same time, court records were corroborating Acuna's revelations - and now a disgraced former assistant district attorney named John Weston admitted that he'd been on the take as well, routinely accepting payoffs to fix cases or, conversely, to railroad defendants against whom there was no evidence but a detective's word. Increasingly, attention turned to the imperious grand dame of the city's Women's Court, Magistrate Jean Norris, nationally hailed as a leading authority on the rehabilitation of fallen lasses. Early in January 1931, as Seabury's bulldogs began growling at her door, Norris decided to take a sabbatical and sail for Europe. THE HOLIDAY WAS blocked, and a very indignant Norris was hauled before Seabury to answer questions, even as more and more women came forward with more and more accusations and charges were brought against more and more vice cops - quite a number of whom decided to put in for retirement. The magistrate's business practices were the least of her difficulties. It happened that she owned much stock in a bonding company that did a rushing business in her court, but she steadfastly refused to concede any impropriety, and Seabury didn't trouble to press the matter very hard. Considerably more damaging were court files related to one of the dubious vice cases in question. The defendant in that case, alone among the vice squad's catches, had appealed her conviction to a higher court - and, as Seabury fast demonstrated, patiently going over them line by line, the transcripts Norris had supplied to that court had been extensively doctored. Norris insisted she had merely edited the documents. But in all cases, the changes made her look good. At one point, according to the original transcript, she had said to a lawyer: "You know what to do. Plead her guilty and tell her to throw herself on the mercy of the court.

" Altered, this line now read: "What is it, counsel? Do you wish to plead her guilty and throw herself on the mercy of the court?"

" Other words she had uttered - "It's too late!"

" "I won't have any more witnesses!"

" "Next case! Step aside!"

" - had been deleted outright. "Don't you see," Seabury inquired pleasantly, "that all of these revisions of the

record put your attitude in the case in a more fair and impartial light than if the changes had not been made?

"No, I certainly don't think so," Norris snapped. For all her fumings and sputterings, tampering with court records was not something Norris could get around. By mid-February, she was facing ouster and disbarment. MEANWHILE, CITY HALL had failed in its attempts to turn down the heat. Efforts to discredit Acuna had gone nowhere. At one point, Corporation Counsel Arthur Hilly had mounted a feeble argument that the entire Seabury probe was illegal and unconstitutional, but Roosevelt had laughed him down. Now, over District Attorney Thomas Crain's observable unwillingness to prosecute, two Tenderloin vice squad plainclothesmen, Leigh Halpern and Daniel Sullivan, were coming to trial on perjury charges. Several women they had sent to Bedford were among the witnesses against them. So was a glamorous "Vanities" showgirl named Georgia Gray, whose husband, one Harry Gibson, was, like Acuna, a confessed vice squad accomplice. Halpern's defense rested chiefly on his sworn testimony that he had never laid eyes on Gibson. Gray, of course, had seen the two of them together many times, and she so testified. On Friday the 20th of February, Crain's jury acquitted Halpern - and Gray went to jail, held as a material witness for the upcoming Sullivan trial. Many of the other women began dropping out of the picture. "What's the use?"

"sighed one. "You can't beat this lousy game. I'm leaving town.

" By now, the suspended cops numbered more than 40. But there was some rumbling concern that there wouldn't be a lot of witnesses against them. Seabury was unruffled. It happened that he had an ace card - a tough Broadway moll who knew everything there was to know about the vice squad cops and their political higherups and who was prepared to blow the town apart with spectacular disclosures. She had talked to Seabury once already. She would go public in another few days. Her name was Vivian Gordon.

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