

# While the Earth Shook

*An unusual crime story*  
by Steve Fisher

A COOL California breeze swept in the window of the apartment. "Three-finger" Schwartz was lying on the floor with his bloody hands outstretched. He was dead.

The man who had murdered him stood looking at the corpse. His buttony eyes were gleaming. This was his first murder and it fascinated him. He looked at the calendar on the wall. It was March 10th; the day of the week was Friday. A ticking clock on the other side of the room indicated that it was seven minutes to six.

Jack Moore pulled away from the body. He still held the crimson-dipped weapon he had picked off the floor. He had finally done the job—had at last gathered enough courage to kill Three-finger Schwartz. Schwartz had been first lieutenant of "Big Boy" Hannigan's gambling ship racketeers.

The ticking clock was the only sound in the room. Many thoughts crowded through Moore's mind. He sensed the graveness of his act only vaguely. He had planned like a man who was an astute genius of murder. But had he left anything undone? Was he leaving any clues behind?

Little matter, though. His task was only half done. He was going after the big shot himself now—after Hannigan. He was going to kill him, then snatch the money and skip the country. It had been only two nights ago that Moore had learned where the currency was kept—it was in an innocent-looking hamburger store on the pike of the beach.

Only two real fears gripped Jack Moore now. He had given consideration to these fears before, but now they were bigger. They were real!

Hannigan was a big man—bigger than Schwartz. If he awoke while Moore was sneaking into his darkened apartment to kill him, all would be lost. Hannigan always slept from three in the afternoon until nine at night—spending the remainder of his time on the gambling ship.

The second fear that gripped Moore was the thought of the Long Beach police. They were efficient men. Three-finger Schwartz, Big Boy

Hannigan and Jack Moore were all known to them. If an alarm got out before he was finished, concerning either of the two murders—they'd pick up Moore on suspicion.

What he had to do then was to make his second kill, and to make it quickly. A powerboat would rush him down the coast to an airport. The getaway would be easy.

Moore's buttony eyes fell on the twisted body of Schwartz again. It hadn't been three minutes ago that Schwartz was facing him. He remembered how agonized he had looked with the knife in his chest. How he had pulled at the blade and got his hands all bloody.

Moore looked at the clock. There was no more time for such grim reflections of satisfaction. He had another murder to commit.

It was exactly five minutes to six.

Suddenly there was a terrific earth-rocking boom. This was followed by a series of severe jolts. The apartment house rocked back and forth crazily. Moore turned ashen. He stumbled; clung to furniture. The room swayed. Moore fell back on top of Schwartz's arm. He scrambled to his feet.

The windows shattered. Glass flew everywhere. Outside Moore saw telephone poles waving back and forth. He heard men, women and children screaming shrilly.

Moore was terrified, but justly so. It was an earthquake!

Quite unexpectedly everything became still again. Moore was at the door. Sweat was running down his pasty face. His eyes were almost popping out. His shaky fingers dove into his pocket where he fumbled for a cigarette. He jammed the smoke in his mouth and lighted it.

Gradually everything began to come back to him. Everything seemed to reassemble.

Moore laughed shakily—a weak, hysterical laughter. In the streets many people were staring madly, blindly, and they were laughing just like Jack Moore was laughing now. Laughing because their human minds could not comprehend the full



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significance of the horrible thing that had just happened.

Moore puffed on his cigarette. Thoughts slowly began flowing through his mind again. His little eyes drifted to the body of Schwartz. A cunning grin gradually found its way to Moore's thin lips. He rubbed his hands together grimly.

Here was a perfect alibi!

Not only a perfect alibi for the murder of Schwartz, but for Big Boy Hannigan's murder as well. All Moore had to do was move quickly!

IT WAS getting dark. Things would be a cinch

for Moore. A naturally framed murder scheme—a perfect crime setup, handed to him—placed into his own greedy little hands!

Moore could already feel possession of the crisp bills that belonged to the gambling ship. His mind's-eye made a picture of those greenbacks which lay hidden in the pike hamburger store.

The apartment rocked again. A new load of debris came tumbling through the roof. It half covered Schwartz's body. Moore laughed a shrill laugh of delight. He sped across the room—and with the earth still shaking—spread more of the fallen plaster over the bloody body.

He left the apartment then, to stalk the streets. He heard the sirens of ambulances. He saw women on the sidewalk with their heads crushed. Saw white hands sticking from beneath piles of fallen debris. He saw heaps of bricks where buildings had once been.

But the sight of this grim tragedy only made Jack Moore happier. It had all been planned just for him. He felt sure of that. He hurried up one street and down another. He was walking out in the middle. It wasn't safe to be close to buildings.

He walked across lawns, through back alleys. He kept prodding himself closer and closer to Big Boy Hannigan's apartment. He saw more death and destruction en route; more wrecked buildings.

The fact that he was seeing stark tragedy—a city plunged into a wild madness—didn't bother him. There were times when he could have stopped to pull a man or woman from under bricks, but he was in a hurry. He had no time. He was going after Hannigan—and then after money!

He finally arrived at a new apartment house near the waterfront. It faced the bay. The battleships at anchor just outside of the breakwater were sending in boatloads of sailors on emergency landing parties.

Moore peered into the dark corridor of Hannigan's apartment house. He felt the bloody knife beneath his coat. As he crept up the hall, his foot kicked bits of plaster. But this building was brand-new. There wasn't much chance of it caving in.

The earth quivered again. Moore came to a sudden stop. People clambered down the hall; they went shrieking out of the doors. The building kept shaking. Why didn't it shake for once and for all, and get it over with? These continual settleings bothered Moore. His gleaming eyes were on the hall ceiling.

Presently Big Boy Hannigan came thumping down the back stairway. Hannigan was dressed in a black smoking robe. He had a huge chest, dark eyes and hair. All Long Beach knew of him—the gambling ship chief.

Hannigan was following the rest of the people outside. Moore crouched back against the wall. The lights were out and it was almost dark outside.

Hannigan reached the back door of the apartment. Moore leaped forward. He sunk the knife squarely into the gambling ship chief's back.

The huge Hannigan stumbled and fell forward.

Blood dribbled down his black smoking robe. The big man was silent in death. He had been equally as silent in life.

Moore knew that he had to act quickly. He grabbed the arms of the corpse and began pulling the body upstairs. It was a long and hard job for Moore but, puffing and sweating, he finally got the dead man into his apartment.

Moore slammed the door shut. He stood in the center of the room staring about him. He looked like a little wet rat. His buttony eyes were bloodshot. His fingers were covered with gore.

In the corner of the room was a small pile of fallen plaster. But this wasn't enough to kill a man. Moore pulled Hannigan's body closer. He showered the corpse with fragments of white plaster. He looked down at his former chief and laughed.

Turning, he went into Hannigan's kitchen and looked about. His eyes fell upon an iron pipe that was on the gas range. He got a table knife, unwound the screws, and pulled out the pipe. Coming back into the living room, he got up on the divan and hit the pipe on the ceiling.

It had been weakened by the quakes. Plaster came tumbling down at his prodding invitation—plaster, bits of mesh wire, slabs of wood and a brick or two. When Moore thought there was enough he jumped down.

He replaced the pipe to the gas range, then picking up one of the bricks, he bashed it on Hannigan's head, and let the brick lie, as if it had done the fatal job. He then piled the rest of the debris over the body.

That done, he took further precaution. He lighted a match to the curtains by the window. If the fire was seen and put out before the apartment burned up, the debris would be excuse enough for Hannigan's death.

Jack Moore watched the little flames leap and lick along the wood window sill. Again he laughed. It was an ugly laugh that echoed back at him.

He went slowly to the door and looked up and down. Slipping into the hall, he slammed the portal behind him. He padded down the steps and out the back entrance of the apartment house.

He stared about. People were standing in groups; they were huddled together—bareheaded, faces ghastly white, jabbering in low tones. Suddenly Moore's alert eyes spotted a police car careening down the street.

How had they found out so soon? Were they after him? Would detectives be in the car to get him for Schwartz's murder?

Moore calmed himself. They hadn't found out after all. They were going on some trifling emergency case. Nevertheless, he decided to get to the hamburger store to pick up the money with all the speed possible.

HE reached the waterfront. It was dark. Hardly any lights were on. Everyone was afraid to burn lights—afraid of fires. Hadn't the fire following San Francisco's earthquake burned the city down?

Moore felt sorry for them. He wasn't afraid of fires! He had started one! But why not? Wasn't this earthquake made to order for his killings? Hadn't it all been done just for his benefit?

He crept up the pike. He had the uncanny feeling that there was someone lurking behind each wrecked building or stand; someone who was going to reach out and grab him. Ominous poles seemed sheltering satanic shadows. Unseen, and yet watchful entities hounded him.

Was someone following him? He—Jack Moore—had killed two men. He was a murderer. The Long Beach police were an efficient crew. Were they after him? Had they found Schwartz or Hannigan?

The closer he got to the hamburger store, the more fears crowded through his warped mind. A thousand unfounded, absurd fears. But Moore had never actually committed murder before. Such fears were natural reactions. Moore was not brave. He was a weak man—weak physically and mentally. But—and the thought was consoling—he was clever enough to get himself some money, and plenty of it!

He jerked himself to a halt by the navy landing. He saw the lines of the blue-jacket emergency landing force. They wore leggings; had rifles with gleaming bayonets on the ends of them. Their white hats were on the front of their heads.

When the first company of men had passed, Moore leaped forward again. He hustled his small figure down the dock and toward the hamburger store. It was still darker down here. There were no lights to lead his way.

He reached the place. It was a low, flat building. Pitch dark. An iron finger of fear pulled at Moore. Something within him warned him to stay back. The hamburger place was half caved in; it was

dangerous—a wrecked shambles.

Yet—the back room of that shambles contained money. A lot of money!

Moore's thin lips pressed grimly together. He stepped forward—then dashed across the pavement and into the doorway of the little store.

He ran squarely into a blue-suited figure whom he had not seen. The man had been etched back in the shadows. Moore stared up at a glistening bayonet. He saw a hard-eyed sailor peering down on him.

"Where d'you think you're headed, buddy?"

Moore was frantic. Did this man know anything? What was he doing here?

In a mad hysteria Moore plunged in past the sailor. He heard a shrill call of "Halt!"

Then came another dull booming of the earth. Everything began shaking, shimmering and swaying. Moore stumbled forward. A board slammed up in his face. He sprawled across it.

The next thing he knew the tall sailor was picking him up. "All right, buddy. I gotta run you in. I thought I told you to halt!"

Run him in? Heavens no! Moore couldn't afford to be run in. He couldn't face the police squad. He slugged at the sailor. The gob punched his arm out and hit Moore.

The sailor started out. He dragged Jack Moore after him. Tears streamed down Moore's face.

"Let me go!" he screamed.

The blue-jacket got him out on the pike. "Say what's the matter with you anyway?"

Hope came to Moore. "I don't know," he blubbered, "I own this joint and—"

"You own the joint?" the sailor gasped. "Well—you aren't supposed to be in it anyway. It's dangerous business. Liable to cave the rest of the way in. Us guys are stationed in front of all stores to stop the beach bums from breaking in to steal anything they can get their hands on."

"You thought I was just going in there to steal stuff?" Moore asked.

"Yeah," the sailor grunted, "and since—"

"Sorry I hit you," Moore said quickly. "But the damned earthquake has me crazy, sailor. Just plain nuts!" It'd be a cinch getting away from the blue-jacket. Moore would return later for the money. He'd have to.

"Maybe I'd better take you to the first aid station," the sailor said.

"Nah," Moore begged. "I'll be all right. Just let

me go. That's all I want to do—is go!”

The sailor pulled a flashlight from his belt. He turned it on Moore's face and baggy white linen suit.

Jack Moore held his breath. If the gob had ever been on the gambling ship he might recognize him. Moore had to get away now—even if he didn't get the money. He couldn't be taken in—and sent up for the murders.

He tried to convince himself that the police would believe—as he wanted them to—that the earthquake had caused the deaths. But there was that shadow of fear that they wouldn't, that frightened him. “All right,” the sailor said at last, “you can go.”

Moore breathed easier. That was a close call. A mighty close call! He'd have to hurry away.

The sailor released him. Jack Moore turned about and started up the pike. He felt the sailor's

flashlight on him as he went.

Suddenly a strong arm stopped him in his tracks. Moore turned about to stare up into the face of the sailor again. This time the gob was snarling. His fists were doubled. He wasn't easygoing any more, nor sympathetic.

“What's—what's wrong?” Moore gasped.

“I've decided to take you to the cops, after all,” the blue-jacket said grimly. “On the back of your coat there's a handprint in blood—”

“Handprint?” Jack Moore gasped. And then a sudden awful picture came to his mind. It was that moment when the first shock of the earthquake had come. Moore had fallen down on Three-finger Schwartz's hand which had been wet with blood.

“Yeah—a handprint,” the sailor said. “One with three fingers!”

Jack Moore rocked hysterically. Damned earthquake!