FROM BAKER STREET TO 1984

Pilgrim Church, Duluth June 1, 1975

It was in the spring of the year 1894 that an elderly bookseller appeared at the door of a London physician who had recently become a widower. The doctor was surprised to see again this odd looking man whom he had recently bumped into on the street. He was even more surprised when, after looking away for a moment, he turned around to discover that the aged bookseller had changed into a man who supposedly fell to his death in Austria three years earlier. At that point the doctor himself fell into a dead faint.

"Holmes!" he cried when he came to. "Is it really you? Can it indeed be true that you are alive? Is it possible that you succeeded in climbing out of that awful abyss?"

Indeed, Sherlock Holmes was alive. With the help of Professor Moriarity Arthur Conan Doyle thought he had succeeded in killing Holmes off. But the public would not stand for it. And so Sherlock Holmes reappeared on the streets of London.

For millions of people Sherlock Holmes is still in London. In fact, right now Sherlock Holmes is engaged in more adventures than at any point in his long and illustrious career. Several new books about him are on the best seller lists. I have not read any of these, although I enjoyed hearing Ken Ost of the Wisconsin State Radio read portions of Holmes' meeting with Sigmund Freud.

However, I did look recently into some of Sherlock Holmes' original adventures. One of these is called The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans. It is a spy story having to do with the theft of secret plans for a submarine from the British Admiralty. In the course of the story Holmes and Doctor Watson arrive at an abandoned house which the great detective believes to be the recent hangout of a master spy and murderer. Holmes announces that they are going to break into the house. To that suggestion Watson responds:

"Could we not get a warrant and legalize it?"

"Hardly on the evidence."

"What can we hope to do?"

"We cannot tell what correspondence may be there."

"I don't like it, Holmes."

"My dear fellow, you shall keep watch in the street. I'll do the criminal part. It's not a time to stick at trifles. Think of Mycroft's note, of the Admiralty, the cabinet, the exalted person who waits for news. We are bound to go."

My answer was to rise from the table. "You are right, Holmes. We are bound to go."

He sprang up and shook me by the hand. "I knew you would not shrink at the last," said he, and for a moment I saw something in his eyes which was nearer to tenderness than I had ever seen.

The next day Holmes and Watson describe their experience in house-breaking to Police Inspector Lestrade.

The professional shook his head over our confessed burglary. "We can't do these things in the force, Mr. Holmes," said he. "No wonder you get results that are beyond us. But some of these days you'll go too far, and you'll find yourself and your friend in trouble.

Now you know that Sherlock Holmes is regarded as something of a forerunner. He was not the first great detective in fiction. Wilkie Collins and Edgar Allen Poe, among others, had paved the way. But Sherlock Holmes set a lot of precedents that were developed by later mystery writers.

A few nights ago I began to wonder whether these precedents were all to the good. I turned on the television to be greeted by an advertisement for David Janssen's latest effort, Harry O.

"He makes his own rules," snarled the announcer. Yes, and perhaps Sherlock Holmes breaking and entering was the beginning of that.

Of course, it is not nearly so dangerous to have private eyes breaking and entering as it is officers of the law. Inspector Lestrade was a model of British legality. Still, he opened the door a little when he joined ranks with a confessed burglar.

The door opened a lot wider that same evening last week when I caught the closing moments of Caribe.

Inside his luxurious apartment the super bad-guy hears a knock on the door. "If you have a warrant," he says to the police lieutenant, "slip it under the door."

At which point the lieutenant, who does not have a warrant, kicks the door open.

Recently we have been hearing one revelation after another about the nefarious violation of our civil liberties by the CIA and the FBI to say nothing of the Watergate figures. People are justifiably upset about these revelations. Yet for more than two generations our fictional heroes (who are the only heroes we have left) have been breaking and entering, beating people up, extorting information, tapping telephone wires, engaging in all sorts of sadistic deceptions in the fashion of Mission Impossible, and even planning assassinations. This has been our diet of adventure. Our heroes have been the people who make their own rules. Vicariously we delight in their freedom, although paradoxically the freedom they exercise is precisely the sort that undermines our own civil liberties.

Surely there must be some connection between this ideal, adventure world and the way people behave in the real world. Is it not possible that our detective stories and our spy thrillers have helped to build up an atmosphere of acceptance for the very sort of behavior that congressional

committees now begin to investigate? Is it really possible for us to approve burglary and mayhem in the realm of imagination without acquiescing to it in some degree in practice?

At earlier eras of church history, church people put much emphasis on keeping clear of harmful amusements. Sometimes today we have a hard time understanding why they got so excited about card-playing, theatre-going and lawn-bowling. Undoubtedly their judgments at times were prudish and silly. But their fundamental concern was legitimate. It isn't enough to see that our work is ethical. Our play, too, should be socially constructive.

Perhaps the most subtly immoral form of play is that in which we delight in the make believe of unethical behavior.

Is it possible that the great Sherlock Holmes, dedicated to queen and country, should have done more to undermine law and order than Professor Moriarty? It is worth thinking about.

It ought not to surprise us if some night there appears on our doorstep a J. Edgar, a G. Gordon or an E. Howard, who will declare to his faithful assistant:

"My dear fellow...It's not a time to stick at trifles. Think of the Secretary's note, of the Department of Defense, the Cabinet, the exalted person who waits for news. We are bound to go."