



When Americans Called for Dr. Kildare

Images of Physicians and Nurses in the Dr. Kildare and Dr. Gillespie Movies, 1937-1947

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Nearly half a century ago, in mid 1937, Paramount studios brought out a modest melodramatic film entitled *Internes Can't Take Money*, based on a Max Brand story about a dedicated

\$10.00-a-month young interne named Jimmy Kildare. Film critics were pleasantly surprised at the quality of the acting, the gripping action, and the appealing love story. The studio was pleased at the unexpect-

edly large box office returns. With a sure eye for a popular idea, MGM studios purchased the screen rights to subsequent installments and brought out a second film about Dr. Kildare the following year; thus began the most popular medical movie series of all time. Eventually, there were sixteen films in the series, which focused its affectionate attentions on the medical miracles of both the brilliant Dr. Kildare and his crusty mentor Dr. Leonard Gillespie (Lionel Barrymore), a premier diagnostician who is dying slowly of cancer and is confined to a wheelchair. (The wheelchair was a plot device concocted to accommodate Barrymore's painful arthritis and hip joint problems.) Not only did this series affect millions of people in the contemporary audiences, it also served as a major model for numerous later movies and television series—medical dramas which helped imprint a well-nigh indelible entertainment media image of doctors and nurses in the public mind.

Although the Paramount film had starred Joel McCrea as James Kildare, the MGM pictures featured Lew Ayres in that role, and they surrounded him with a well-loved and continuing cast of characters—doctors, nurses, hospital staff, girlfriend, and parents. Ayres became famous in the role, making nine of the Kildare movies before his career crashed in 1942 as a result of his declaring himself a conscientious objector to the war—a most unpopular stance in that era. Theatre owners boycotted his movies, and the studio dropped him, dissociating themselves from his sudden unpopularity. The movie series continued without him; however, the final six films concentrated more attention on Dr. Gillespie and his new set of eager, prospective interne-assistants. Whichever doctor was being glorified, all the films followed what *Variety* called “the usual formula”: they all mixed comedy, medical problems and “good health” lectures into dependable entertainment, as the following brief plot summaries will verify.

1. *Internes Can't Take Money* (1937). Kildare wins gangster Hanlon's (Lloyd Nolan) gratitude by saving his life with an impromptu operation for a stab wound in a saloon by using as surgical instruments a lime-squeezer, an ice pick, a bottle of rum and other bartenders' utensils. But he must refuse the \$1000 Hanlon sends him in thanks because taking money is against hospital regulations. The interne also tries to help his impromptu nurse in



1. *Internes Can't Take Money*, Paramount, 1937.

the barroom operation, Janet Haley (Barbara Stanwyck), widow of a bank robber and herself recently released from jail. She is trying to find out where her husband hid their young daughter, but the only man who knows (another gangster), Innes (played by Stanley Ridges), will sell the information only for \$1000 or for Janet's sexual favors. Finally Hanlon helps Kildare pressure Innes, who is seriously wounded and is saved by another of Kildare's emergency operations, into revealing the whereabouts of the child, and Janet is happily reunited with her.

2. *Young Dr. Kildare* (1938). Having graduated from medical school, Kildare goes home to help in his father's country practice, but, wanting a more important mission, he decides to take an internship at New York's Blair General Hospital, where he meets Dr. Gillespie (Lionel Barrymore), a gruff but brilliant diagnostician. On an ambulance case, Kildare disagrees with a psychiatrist's diagnosis that a society girl (Lynne Carver) is insane and seeks other causes for her attempted suicide. Against the opposition of his superiors, he gains the girl's confidence, discovers the mysterious fear that haunts her and has been driving her to continued attempts at self-destruction, and cures her completely. Impressed with Kildare's diagnostic skills, Dr. Gillespie makes him his personal assistant.

3. *Calling Dr. Kildare* (1939). Annoyed with Kildare's penchant for making exotic diagnoses, Dr. Gillespie sends him out to work in a neighborhood clinic in a tenement district to learn some common sense. He also sends along pretty Nurse Mary Lamont (Laraine Day), ostensibly to aid Kildare but



4. LEW AYRES cures Helen Gilbert's blindness, aided by Lionel Barrymore and Laraine Day, in a dramatic moment in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Secret of Dr. Kildare*, 1939.



5. LEW AYRES, Laraine Day, and John Eldredge in the grim insulin shock episode in *Dr. Kildare's Strange Case*. MGM, 1940.

really to spy on him and report his progress to the benevolent Gillespie. There Kildare saves the life of a choked child with adrenalin and saves another youth suffering from a gunshot wound secretly with a personal blood transfusion by the light of a lamp in a dark cellar, not reporting the case to the police because he believes the boy is innocent of a gangland murder which shortly hits the newspapers. He also falls madly in love with Rosalie (Lana Turner), the boy's glamorous sister. The boy is accused of murder and Kildare is dismissed from the hospital for being an accessory. However, Kildare solves matters by finding the real murderer, and Gillespie distangles Kildare from the siren Rosalie (who was only using him) and sends him to see the wholesome Nurse Lamont, who becomes his perennial girlfriend until she leaves the series six films later.

4. *The Secret of Dr. Kildare* (1939). This time Kildare is trying to take care of two people: Dr. Gillespie, who is working himself to death, and a millionaire's daughter (Helen Gilbert) with hysterical blindness. Knowing Gillespie cannot keep working on his laboratory project without an assistant, Kildare pretends to quit his \$20.00-per-month internship in order to make a lot of money treating the rich girl. All the complications are ultimately sorted out after the ailing Gillespie gets his needed vacation, and Kildare discovers the subconscious terror that caused the disturbed young woman to go blind. She is happily reunited with her fiancé, and Kildare declares his love for Nurse Lamont who comforted him when he thought he had ruined his career by "abandoning" Gillespie for his own good.

5. *Dr. Kildare's Strange Case* (1940). Dr. Kildare turns down an offer to head a research institute so that he can remain with his revered Dr. Gillespie. Assisting a young brain surgeon, Dr. Lane (Shepperd Strudwick), Kildare advises him to operate on an accident victim with a skull fracture. After the operation, the patient is not in his right mind, and Dr. Lane, who has had a recent series of surgical failures, is suspended, has confidence badly shaken. Risking his own suspension, Kildare and Nurse Lamont secretly work to restore the patient to mental health by inducing insulin shock. The patient recovers, and Dr. Lane recovers his confidence.

6. *Dr. Kildare Goes Home* (1940). Kildare is appointed as resident assistant to Dr. Gillespie, but he has to go home because he discovers his father is in bad health from overwork in his rural medical practice. Dr. Kildare tries to set up a clinic in the poverty-stricken town, asking the country folk each to subscribe ten cents a week to support three young doctors who will supply assured health care. Prejudice is strong against this new idea for socialized medicine, and influential merchant George Winslow (Gene Lockhart) is especially forceful in his opposition. However, he changes his mind when Kildare diagnoses and cures his sudden attack of a rare form of meningitis. The clinic is established; Dr. Kildare senior can get some rest; and young Dr. Kildare can return to his big city hospital to continue practice and research with Dr. Gillespie. Kildare and Nurse Mary Lamont get engaged in this film.

7. *Dr. Kildare's Crisis* (1940). Kildare and Mary are making their wedding plans when Mary's brother

Douglas (Robert Young) arrives, displaying strange symptoms of elation followed by depression. Kildare soon diagnoses epilepsy, a verdict which causes Mary to renounce the marriage plans since the disease may be hereditary. Dr. Gillespie discovers that Douglas' ailment is not hereditary but due to a trauma-induced head injury and a brain operation soon sets everyone's troubles right. Dr. Gillespie explains to Jimmy that the episode proves the old axiom that a physician should never undertake to diagnose or treat his loved ones; his personal emotions hamper the cold reason necessary to detect the small details in their ailments. He, as a dispassionate health care provider, was able to find the obscure cause of the disease which Jimmy had overlooked due to personal emotion over his smashed romance with the patient's sister.

8. *The People vs. Dr. Kildare* (1941). Kildare stops at an automobile accident scene and does an emergency operation on one of the injured, beautiful Frances Marlowe (Bonita Granville), a famous ice skating star. When her leg remains mysteriously paralyzed, wrecking her career, she sues Kildare for malpractice in a \$100,000 damage suit. She is just about to win her suit when Kildare decides her problem might have been caused by *bifida occulta*, a hidden tumor on her spine. Offered the hope of a cure, Frances agrees to an operation and, of course, recovers completely.

9. *Dr. Kildare's Wedding Day* (1941). Kildare and Mary happily count off the few remaining days before their long-postponed wedding. Kildare can't get to any of the pre-wedding parties, however, as he is busy helping Gillespie solve the worrisome



7. LEW AYRES, Lionel Barrymore and Laraine Day discuss with Robert Young his unusual symptoms in *Dr. Kildare's Crisis*. MGM, 1940.



9. "Jimmy, do I have to die?" . . . asks Laraine Day of Lew Ayres in the high point of *Dr. Kildare's Wedding Day*. MGM, 1941.

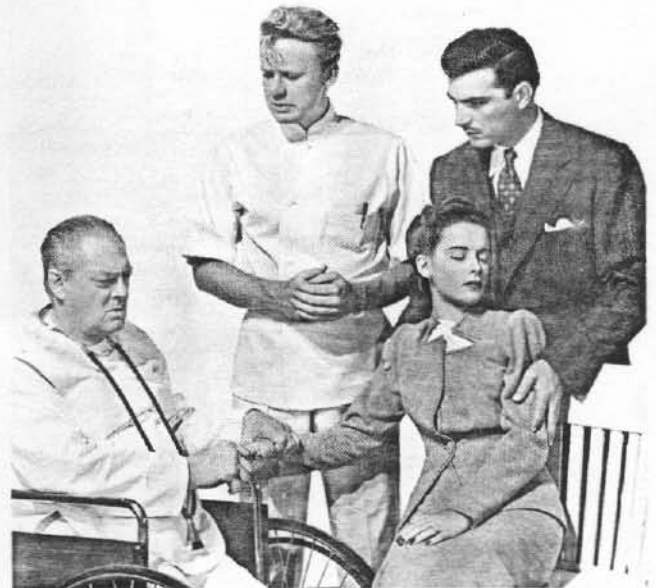
case of a famous orchestra conductor (Nils Asther) who is going deaf. On the eve of the wedding, Mary, crossing the street near Grand Central Station, is struck down by a truck and dies in the hospital, soon after Kildare reaches her bedside, leaving Kildare in such despair that he decides to give up his career. Gillespie restores Kildare's lost confidence by telling him of his own lost love and by tricking Kildare into finding the cause of the conductor's deafness, which he then cures.

10. *Dr. Kildare's Victory* (1941). Kildare encourages a romance between a young interne (Robert Sterling) and a nurse (Jean Rogers). Interne Winthrop is dismissed for bringing an accident victim to Blair Hospital when the accident happened in another hospital's service district. The victim, beautiful socialite Cookie Charles (Ann Ayars) recovers after Kildare operates to remove a splinter of glass from her heart. While Kildare fights the hospital board to get the silly zoning rules changed, Cookie schemes to win Kildare's heart. Kildare wins; Cookie loses. Audiences never found out if Kildare's broken heart was consoled with a new love, for this was his last story. Actor Lew Ayres was dropped by public and studio alike for his pacifism during the war.

11. *Calling Dr. Gillespie* (1942). Gillespie with his new assistant, young Dutch psychiatrist Dr. Gerniede (Philip Dorn) diagnose an apparently nice young man, Roy Todwell (Philip Brown), insane after his fiancée Marcia (Donna Reed) describes his wild rages which cause him to smash and destroy

anything which comes within his reach. Roy's parents and family doctor ignore Gillespie's and Gerniede's warnings. Roy, a "dual personality" homicidal manic, runs away to Detroit, where he kills two innocent men, and then fixes on the idea that he must kill Dr. Gillespie in order to regain his sanity. He eludes the guards at Blair Hospital by posing as a doctor and very nearly kills Gillespie except for the timely interference of Wayman (Nat Pendleton), a hospital orderly. Roy is imprisoned (despite his obvious insanity), and Marcia decides to become a nurse and joins Blair Hospital as a probationary student nurse.

12. *Dr. Gillespie's New Assistant* (1942). Dr. Gillespie, trying to choose among three bright internes for his new assistant, gives them each a difficult case to diagnose. Most interesting is the case given to Dr. Randall Adams (Van Johnson, then a new heartthrob in Hollywood). Stuart's patient, Clair Young (Susan Peters), has been stricken with amnesia on her wedding day and no longer recognizes her distraught husband. Stuart thinks that shock from a former experience with a man is causing Claire's amnesia, and he discovers that she has a child from a former marriage that her new husband does not know about. It takes Gillespie, however, to reveal that her amnesia is only pretended. Fatherly Gillespie tells Claire that she cannot have any more



12. LIONEL BARRYMORE and Van Johnson examine the amnesia patient, played by Susan Peters, as her husband (Horace McNally) watches anxiously, in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Dr. Gillespie's New Assistant*, 1943.

children and convinces her husband that "second hand wives" are not to be scorned, and the couple reunites happily, taking the child home also.

13. *Dr. Gillespie's Criminal Case* (1943). Much goes on in this film. The internes' rivalry to become Gillespie's assistant continues. The doctors and nurses battle an epidemic of erysipelas in the children's ward. Twelve of the twenty-four children are stricken and the physicians and nurses work endless hours, one of the nurses dying before Gillespie and his assistants pull the children through. Dr. Gillespie also convinces a legless Pearl Harbor veteran (William Lundigan) that he is not condemned to life in a wheelchair, restoring his confidence, and getting him up dancing on artificial legs with Superintendent of Nurses Molly Byrd (Alma Kruger) before the movie's end. And finally, Gillespie fights to get the insane murderer, Roy Todwell (from *Calling Dr. Gillespie*), out of jail and into an asylum so that he may receive treatment for demen-

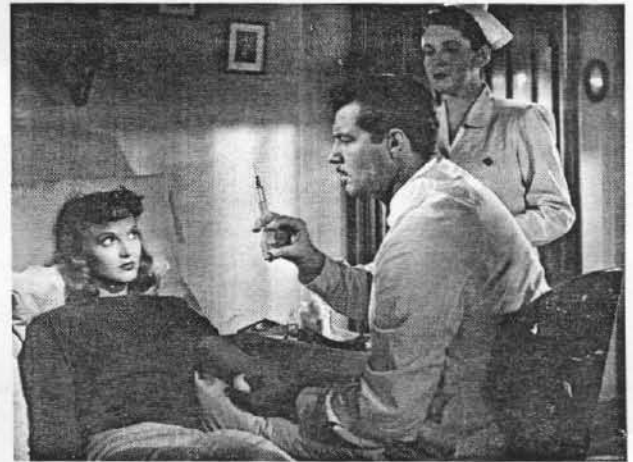


13. LIONEL BARRYMORE, Keye Luke and Alma Kruger promise William Lundigan, playing the man wounded at Pearl Harbor, that he will walk again, in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Gillespie's Criminal Case*.

tia praecox. Gillespie and interne Adams (Van Johnson) visit the prison board just as Roy finds out his ex-fiancée is engaged to another man. Berserk, Roy attempts a prison break, taking the doctors and board members hostage. Gillespie finally convinces Roy that he is truly insane, whereupon Roy rushes out and is shot dead by the guards.

14. *Three Men in White* (1944). Gillespie is still trying to choose which of two internes to choose as his assistant—Randall Adams (Van Johnson) or

Lee Wong How (Keye Luke)—and again he sets them at test cases to determine their respective skills. Again, both diagnose and cure their patients. Lee Wong diagnoses a six-year-old child's mysterious ailment as the result of a dietary deficiency and Randall ("Red") helps an "incurable" arthritic woman walk again. Romance and comedy fill out the plot as a gorgeous blonde hospital social worker, Ruth Edley (Marilyn Maxwell) pursues the handsome Dr. Adams and tries to enlist Gillespie's help in getting Adams to agree to marriage.



16. *Dark Delusion*. MGM, 1947.

15. *Between Two Women* (1944). Dr. "Red" Adams (Van Johnson) comes to the fore as the star of this story, which rightly should be called "Between Three Women," as that is the number of women who create the plot strands. First is Ruth Edley (Marilyn Maxwell), who is still doing her best (and who finally succeeds) in capturing Red's heart. Second is a pretty night club singer (Gloria DeHaven) who collapses of malnutrition and cannot understand why she is no longer able to eat. Red uncovers the subconscious obsession which has caused her malady, and she recovers quickly. The third woman Red helps is Sally (Marie Blake), perennial switchboard operator in all of the episodes of the Kildare-Gillespie series. Stricken suddenly with an ailment that requires the removal of her kidney, Sally insists that no one but young Red must perform the dangerous operation. Although she nearly dies on the operating table, Red saves her. And all ends happily for all three women.

16. *Dark Delusion* (1947). Dr. Gillespie has a new assistant for this story—Dr. Tommy Coalt (James Craig)—whom he sends on assignment to help rich

Cynthia Grace, whose parents want her committed to a mental hospital. Tommy uses narcolepsy to find that her problem is not insanity but temporary kleptomania and schizophrenia due to brain pressure caused by a fall from a horse. He spirits Cynthia away and without her family's knowledge, performs a brain operation on her. She is, of course, cured. Gillespie tries to keep Tommy out of trouble, and his other assistant, Dr. Lee Wong (Keye Luke) solves problems for a couple wanting to adopt a child.

At this point MGM admitted that it was hard to find new plots for the long running series, and they announced that *Dark Delusion* would be the final entry. Although contemporary film critics repeatedly praised the Kildare-Gillespie movies for being new, fresh, original and "well off the beaten track," the script writers tended to follow fairly predictable formula and to rely heavily on the idea of mental disorders. Fully eight of the sixteen films deal with patients who are either insane, afraid of going insane, thought by others to be insane, or so obsessed with some mental problem that they no longer function well physically. In every case but one the good doctors can cure the problem completely—either by operating on the brain or by uncovering the patient's subconscious fear. The one exception was poor Roy Todwell in *Calling Dr. Gillespie* and *Dr. Gillespie's Case*, who died as a result of other people's bad judgment about him, and the suggestion is strong that Gillespie and his assistant could have helped Todwell if the boy's parents and family doctor had not forbidden it.

Even if the star patient is not in danger of insanity, nearly all of the films emphasize the importance of the patient's mental condition. Gillespie frequently growls at his assistants not to leap for exotic diagnoses before they have determined whether the patient is fretting about debts, marital problems, or other mundane matters. Hence we often see the doctors getting family rifts smoothed out, adjusting the patient's diet, ridding patients of their fears about imagined diseases, or uncovering childhood traumas as a means of treating the physical symptoms. Human sympathy and understanding form the basis of the practice of medicine that Dr. Gillespie tries to pass on to his assistants.

There are other elements in the formula that describe nearly all the episodes in the series. Although each film touches on several medical cases,

it strongly focuses on only one. Gillespie's assistant (Kildare or one of the several later ones) is always the physician primarily responsible for the main patient, and he performs brilliantly though often with a hidden assist or surreptitious clue from the paternal Gillespie. Gillespie insists that his assistants make their own diagnoses, but he uses his nurses as friendly spies to keep tabs on the young doctors' progress; and if the assistant is having trouble, Gillespie will include a hint in his classroom lecture or lead a conversation in such a way that the younger man will come up with the appropriate solution on his own.

Medical mysteries were not solely responsible for catching the public's interest, however. Each story featured a bit of wholesome romance (usually involving the interne or assistant), some comic relief, and further explorations of the characters and relationships of the Blair General Hospital personnel, who grew increasingly familiar to, and loved by, the public. Some of the characters served mostly for background and realism. Walter Kingsford always appeared briefly as Dr. Walter Carew, the harried administrator of the hospital, who has his troubles with the irascible Gillespie and with the brilliant but unorthodox young internes. Samuel S. Hinds and Emma Dunn played Kildare's loving parents, quiet, a kindly country doctor and his wife who were very proud of their son.

Other characters served almost exclusively for comic relief. George Reed played the simple Conover, Gillespie's personal orderly or manservant, but the humor in his characterization is rather embarrassing to a modern viewer as it depended on the 1930s Hollywood stereotype for Blacks. Marie Blake was Sally, a cheery, popular, not-too-bright switchboard operator at Blair Hospital. At her center of communications, Sally was usually in on all of the schemes, rumors, and secrets at this hospital. She carried on a teasing flirtation with the orderly and ambulance driver Joe Wayman (Nat Pendleton), a fiercely loyal and stupid lummo responsible for much of the broad humor in the various episodes. He also serves as general handyman around the hospital, proudly wielding his huge monkey wrench. One scene shows Joe trying to fix a defective light in Gillespie's office, but when he pushes the light switch, the radio comes on; when he turns on the radio, the ultraviolet ray machine goes on, etc., etc. The routine lasts about five minutes as Gillespie grows nearly apoplectic with



NAT PENDLETON tells Lionel Barrymore, Walter Kingsford and Alma Kruger that "he's caught amnesia" in a comical moment in *Dr. Gillespie's New Assistant*

rage. Such scenes were typical of Joe's brand of heavy slap-stick humor. If his humor sometimes lacked subtlety, he made up for it by the genuine love he felt for the doctors, and it was he who saved Gillespie's life by throwing his trusty wrench at the insane Roy Todwell just as Roy was about to shoot.

The real heart of the film series lay in the relationships between the doctors and nurses, and there were numerous parallels drawn in their characterizations. Dr. Leonard Gillespie, superbly played by Lionel Barrymore, was the real center of attention, all other characters turning to him as daisies turn toward the sun. Not only did he hold together the lucrative Dr. Kildare series for fifteen episodes, but he also gave new meaning to the public image of an authoritative medical diagnostician still wholly devoted to the high ideals of medical practice. He has a short-fused temper and a fierce scowl, and he tends to shout rudely for whatever he wants. On the other hand, everyone seems to know that the gruff manner covers a very sentimental, warm, loving heart. The piercing eyes that gaze out from beneath the beetling eyebrows often light up with humor, mischievousness, and sympathy for those he deems worthy. Fools, however, he does not suffer gladly.

Gillespie has his own office in the hospital, as well as his own lab and living quarters. Molly Byrd, superintendent of nursing who also lives in the hospital, sometimes appears bringing Gillespie's meals from the hospital kitchen, and he sometimes needs nursing care when he works harder than his fragile health can bear. His ailment is somewhat mysterious. Early in the series, Gillespie tells Kildare that he has cancer and has not too much longer to live, but as the years pass the subject rarely arises again. Occasionally he has relapses, whereupon all his colleagues fiercely and lovingly demand that he must get some rest. The rest always seems to fix him up, and except for remaining in the wheelchair (necessitated by Barrymore's own crippling arthritis), Gillespie goes on strongly as long as the series lasts.

For all the humorous emphasis on Gillespie's terrible temper and gruffness, the films leave no doubt that he was to be considered a truly great and wonderful man. He has a special tenderness for children, although when a nurse comes in and finds him dandling a baby in his lap and kissing it, Gillespie gets flustered and rudely orders her out. His great talent is as a diagnostician, and here his perceptions go far beyond the bounds of ordinary medicine. With only a few questions he is able to tell that a young boy, whom other doctors have diagnosed as having fatal pernicious anemia, is actually suffering only from a dilated spleen, and that removal of the spleen will cure him completely. At other times, Gillespie seemingly peers into patients' hearts and minds and often perceives that worry, not disease, is responsible for their symptoms. For instance, in *Calling Dr. Kildare*, when Jimmy was excitedly experimenting with lab animals to prove that the patient has deadly "Q fever," Dr. Gillespie finds out that the man is really worried about the eight remaining payments on his piano. When Gillespie lends the man the necessary money, he recuperates promptly. Gillespie then lectures Kildare:

"The most important role of a diagnostician is to listen to his patient. He must look into the patient's mind, heart and soul. A patient isn't a guinea pig; a guinea pig doesn't worry about paying bills, or about his wife's running off with another man.

Hence, the good doctor often acts not only as a medical man but also as a father-confessor, marital counselor, and therapist to the patients.

Gillespie also acts as teacher, hero, and father-figure to the various young internes who so avidly work to become his assistant. To all the internes he is kindly, lending them money and books, offering help for their problems, but, being an elitist at heart, he is most interested in the few who show special talent—Kildare (Lew Ayres) for most of the series, then Red Adams (Van Johnson) and others, whom Gillespie picked because they were the only ones who could answer the difficult trick question by which he tested them. He pushes the talented internes the hardest, giving them the most difficult cases to handle and then insisting that they handle them alone. He acts as if he has complete confidence in their ability, but secretly he keeps an eye on them and makes sure they get the help they need. He praises their successes and gently chides them for their failures (which are usually minor). To one interne in *Dr. Gillespie's New Assistant* who feels upset about his brusque bedside manner with a patient, for instance, Gillespie says, "Your problem, son, was that you blurted out what you wanted to hear yourself say instead of what was best for the other fellow to hear."

In many ways Gillespie defines the other doctors, not only because he trains them and molds them to his own image of medical care, but also because he always tells them about parallel experiences in his own life in order to help them handle their personal troubles. When Kildare is fretting about Mary Lamont's brother's illness, Gillespie tells him for the first time about his own beloved brother, who succumbed to disease. When Kildare swears to quit medicine after Mary's tragic death, Gillespie is there with comfort and with tales of his own fiancée's death many years ago. He too had wanted to leave medicine in his despair and had been persuaded by Walter Reed himself that he had no right to waste his medical talents. Gillespie, of course, convinces Kildare that his skilled hands and mind belong to the public, however much his heart may belong to the dear departed Mary.

James Kildare is Gillespie's special pride. He is the one Gillespie has "waited years for"—the one who has that genius for diagnosis which cannot be taught, cannot be picked up from books. Kildare, in turn, practically worships Gillespie, turning down an offer of a more lucrative position for the privilege of working with the great man. He works himself nearly into a state of exhaustion to make himself a worthy student, but he concludes wearily that he'll

never know half as much as his mentor knows. When Gillespie is in danger of killing himself with overwork, Kildare is ready to sacrifice his own position to save the older doctor from his own zeal. Knowing that Gillespie cannot continue his intensive research without an assistant, Kildare quits—ostensibly to take a better-paying job—and he sorrowfully bears Gillespie's scorn and disappointment until all is set right at the end.

Despite his self-sacrifice and humility around Gillespie, and despite his generally meek, bland appearance, Kildare is known about the hospital as something of a maverick. He does not hesitate to overturn rules or standard procedure in an emergency or for personal reasons. He especially has a talent for emergency, on-the-spot operations on patients he deems too critical to be moved to a hospital. Furthermore, he is not in the least hampered by lack of the proper equipment. When he operates on the gangster in the saloon, he uses liquor as an antiseptic, a lime-squeezer as a retractor, and a violin string for sutures. (Obviously the script writer had no acquaintance with either sutures or violin strings!) A woman customer in the bar brings the inevitable bowls of boiling water and serves successfully as impromptu nurse for the talented young doctor. In another story, he does an emergency splenectomy by the side of the road on an accident victim whose only anesthesia is the faint she has fallen into. In yet another, he rigs up a device by which to transfuse his blood directly into the gunshot victim who has asked Kildare not to report the injury to the police. Needless to say, his patients always recover completely, and Kildare lives up, once again, to Gillespie's expectations for him.

Just as the young doctors are defined by Gillespie—by his demands and expectations of them, by the almost father-son relationship between them—so too are the nurses in the series defined by the doctors and by their relationships with them. Three nurses appear consistently in all or nearly all of the episodes—Mary Lamont (Laraine Day), Nurse Parker (Nell Craig) and Molly Byrd (Alma Kruger). Mary Lamont, of course, is the primary romantic interest in the series, being Dr. Kildare's fiancée, and we know far more about her as "Jimmy's" girlfriend than as a professional nurse.

Mary is a pretty girl with a lively, intelligent face and dark curly hair. The occasional curl that slips down on her forehead and the lovely dimple that plays around her mouth emphasizes her girlish

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never know half as much as his mentor knows. When Gillespie is in danger of killing himself with overwork, Kildare is ready to sacrifice his own position to save the older doctor from his own zeal. Knowing that Gillespie cannot continue his intensive research without an assistant, Kildare quits—ostensibly to take a better-paying job—and he sorrowfully bears Gillespie's scorn and disappointment until all is set right at the end.

Despite his self-sacrifice and humility around Gillespie, and despite his generally meek, bland appearance, Kildare is known about the hospital as something of a maverick. He does not hesitate to overturn rules or standard procedure in an emergency or for personal reasons. He especially has a talent for emergency, on-the-spot operations on patients he deems too critical to be moved to a hospital. Furthermore, he is not in the least hampered by lack of the proper equipment. When he operates on the gangster in the saloon, he uses liquor as an antiseptic, a lime-squeezer as a retractor, and a violin string for sutures. (Obviously the script writer had no acquaintance with either sutures or violin strings!) A woman customer in the bar brings the inevitable bowls of boiling water and serves successfully as impromptu nurse for the talented young doctor. In another story, he does an emergency splenectomy by the side of the road on an accident victim whose only anesthesia is the faint she has fallen into. In yet another, he rigs up a device by which to transfuse his blood directly into the gunshot victim who has asked Kildare not to report the injury to the police. Needless to say, his patients always recover completely, and Kildare lives up, once again, to Gillespie's expectations for him.

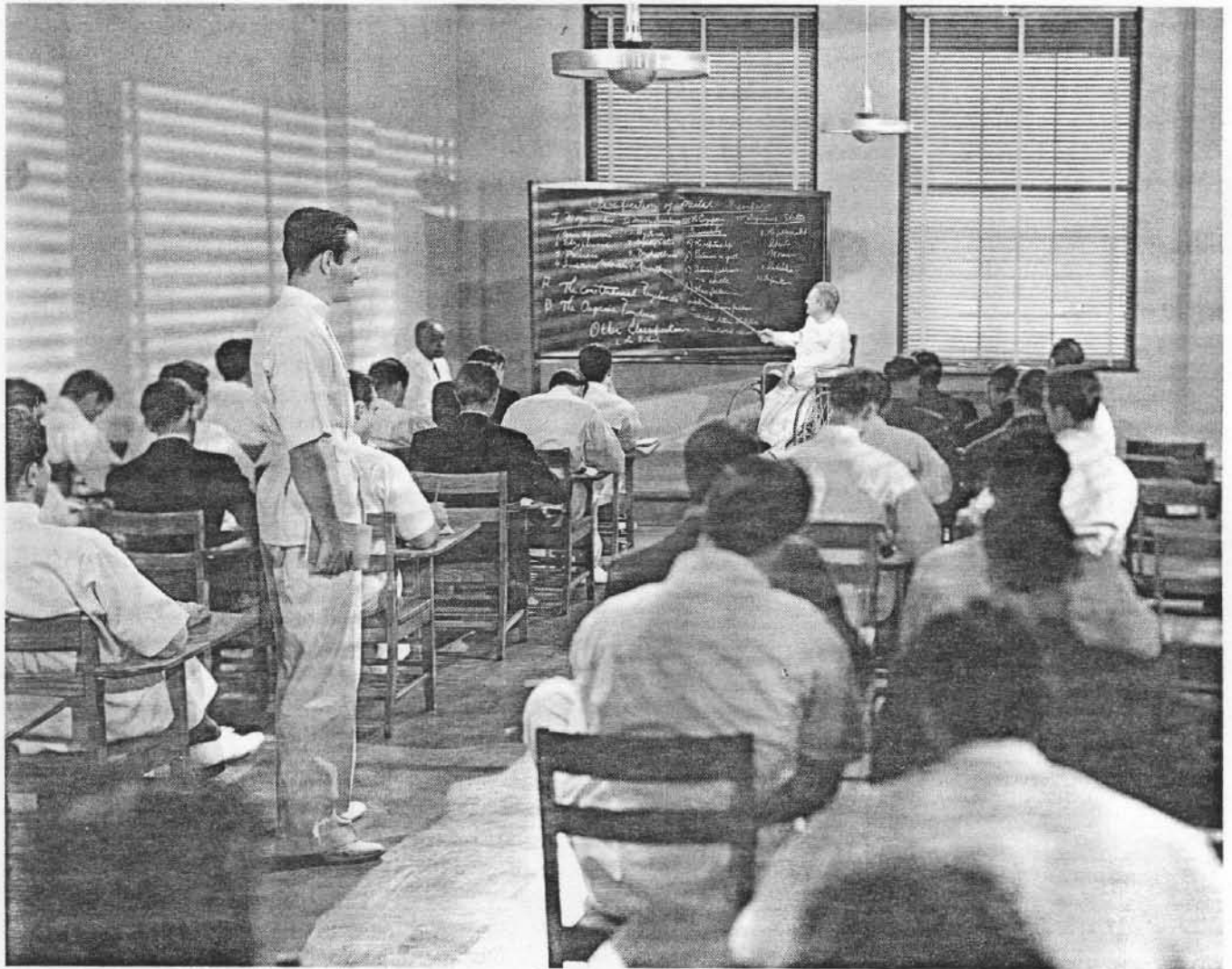
Just as the young doctors are defined by Gillespie—by his demands and expectations of them, by the almost father-son relationship between them—so too are the nurses in the series defined by the doctors and by their relationships with them. Three nurses appear consistently in all or nearly all of the episodes—Mary Lamont (Laraine Day), Nurse Parker (Nell Craig) and Molly Byrd (Alma Kruger). Mary Lamont, of course, is the primary romantic interest in the series, being Dr. Kildare's fiancée, and we know far more about her as "Jimmy's" girlfriend than as a professional nurse.

Mary is a pretty girl with a lively, intelligent face and dark curly hair. The occasional curl that slips down on her forehead and the lovely dimple that plays around her mouth emphasizes her girlish

sweetness. It is impossible to expect anything but goodness and sympathy from such a person, and indeed she always seems to do her job well and conscientiously. Her crisp, white uniform and cap and trim figure seem to suggest efficiency and a professional attitude. However, she is rarely seen actually nursing and virtually never seen alone with a patient. Occasionally, she assists at an operation or prepares medication for a patient, but her main function is to interact with Kildare.

Interestingly, Mary is one of the few characters, indeed the only main character, who escapes Gillespie's cantankerous tongue-lashings. With Mary, he is kindly and paternal, apparently considering himself as a substitute father. He first brings Kildare and Mary together (in *Calling Dr. Kildare*) by

setting Mary to spy on the still-blundering young interne while she serves as his clinic nurse. When Kildare falls madly in love with a criminal's glamorous girlfriend (played by Lana Turner), Gillespie firmly sets him straight, steering Jimmy away from the "naughty little girl" and into sweet Mary's chaste presence, where he remains happily until her untimely death. In *Dr. Kildare's Wedding Day*, when Mary and Jimmy plan their wedding, Gillespie happily assigns himself the honor of giving away the bride. Hence, although the plots call for relatively little interaction between Mary and Dr. Gillespie, it is Gillespie who creates her primary role as the worthy consort for the golden-boy doctor. Furthermore, he clearly indicates her relative unimportance as Kildare's wife: "Mary, a doctor is a



DR. KILDARE comes to Dr. Gillespie's class . . . Lew Ayres, though he is Lionel Barrymore's assistant, comes to the daily class of the great doctor in this scene from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Secret of Dr. Kildare*.



MARY LAMONT (Laraine Day) acted more as Dr. Kildare's girlfriend than as a professional nurse.

doctor for twenty-four hours a day. The rest of the time he can be a husband." When Mary smilingly says she understands, Gillespie muses: "I wonder if you realize that a doctor swears away all his rights as a human being. He doesn't belong to himself or his wife. He just belongs to medicine."

Mary is nothing if not a dutiful woman in this scheme. Despite the fact that she is considered an excellent nurse and shows every sign of enjoying her job, she cheerfully discards the job when marriage is imminent. At her farewell party she tells the other nurses that she cannot wait to quit and become Mrs. Jimmy Kildare. As far as she is concerned, "everything Jimmy does is perfect," and she is delighted to subsume her whole life to Jimmy's advancement. Indeed several times she is ready to sacrifice her claim on him altogether if it would benefit him in some way. For instance, when she believes that her brother has hereditary epilepsy, she breaks her engagement rather than hamper Jimmy with potentially epileptic wife and children. Another time, just a week before the wedding, she worries that a wife might hinder Jimmy in performing all the brilliant things expected of him. Molly Byrd promptly quells her fears by telling her that "marriage helps a man's career." Clearly the same is not considered true for women. Mary even dies because of Jimmy—she is killed when she comes into town to attend his pre-nuptial party because he is too busy with a patient to attend. Even on her deathbed, Mary's last thoughts are for Kildare,

not for herself: "This is going to be much easier for me than it is for you. Poor, sweet Jimmy."

The same thing could be said for the other two regular nurses in the series also, except that they revolve more around Gillespie than around Kildare. Nurse Parker (Nell Craig) has a very limited role: she is there to jump when Gillespie shouts. As far as one can see, her only "nursing" duties are to usher patients into Gillespie's office and put away equipment at the end of the day. Parker is a slightly dumpy, middle-aged woman with lugubrious dark eyes and a face that rarely lights in a smile. In all the years the series ran, viewers never learned her first name. Gillespie seems always to speak to her in a roar, calling her "Nosey" Parker, insulting her for no discernible reason, delighting in terrorizing the timid woman. "Well, get on out," he roars in *Three Men in White*, "are you waiting for me to kiss you?" In *Dr. Gillespie's New Assistant*, he says, "Parker, your job is to throw undesirable people out of this office. You're undesirable, so throw yourself out." Parker always scurries to obey, looking as if she thought Gillespie might bite her at any moment.

In a way both Gillespie and Parker are playing a game. Although Parker does not have the nerve to fight back, she knows that Gillespie's ravings are not to be taken at face value. She might not like his insults, but she does not take them too seriously. Indeed, she worries if he changes his abrasive behavior. One night in *The Secret of Dr. Kildare* she daringly dismisses the remaining patients in the waiting room, explaining later to Gillespie that she did it because he needed rest. The weary doctor slumps and says mildly, "Perhaps you're right. Thank you, Parker." That unusual bit of courtesy scares Parker, who seeks out Molly Byrd and confides that she is worried about Gillespie. Obviously, she cares for the irascible boss.

Gillespie's insults and shouts are frequent enough and extravagant enough that they clearly are meant to be taken in a humorous vein (as in *Dr. Kildare Goes Home*: "Judas Hibiscus Priest! Why in the name of seven thousand double-barrelled blue devils doesn't that bow-legged buzzard-brain fix these squatty pink-frilled lights!") And no one but Mary is spared his barbed tongue. The viewer is continually directed to consider Gillespie as Crusty But Lovable. Still, the constant discourtesy with which he treats his nurses reflects unfavorably on them, especially since he insults them when patients are

present. To one patient in *Dr. Kildare's Victory* Gillespie says, when Parker has just interrupted with a perfectly reasonable question, "Dimwit! Excuse the ignorant help around here!"

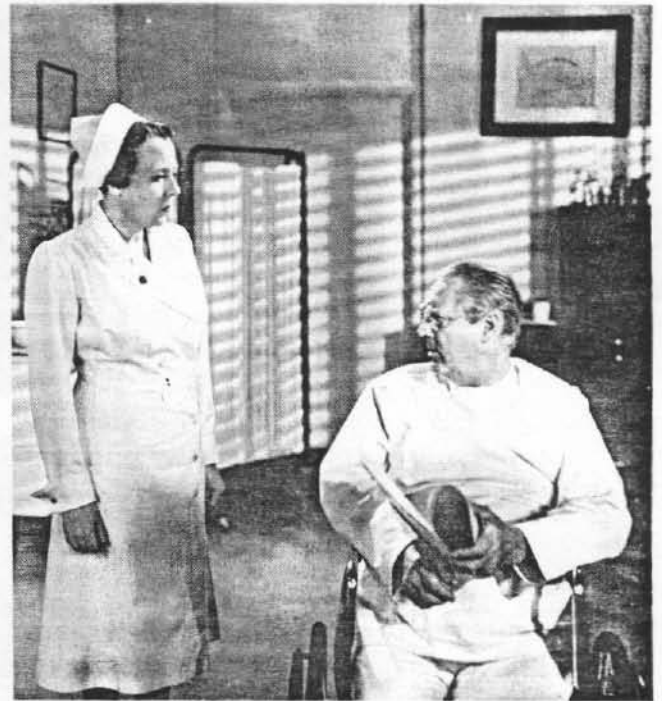
The supposed humor of Gillespie's attitude scarcely hides the damage it does to the image of these nurses as women, as professionals, or even as human beings. As far as he is concerned, the nurses exist to do his bidding, to wait on him, to gather information for him, and do to it all immediately. Although he waxes poetical about the ideals of medicine to which doctors nobly sacrifice their lives, he never accords the same idealism or professionalism to nurses. They are merely the hired help, useful for assisting the doctors. It is a telling point that Gillespie's highest praise for Mary Lamont on the eve of her anticipated marriage in *Dr. Kildare's Wedding Day* is, "You deserve everything, Mary, even Jimmy." If a good doctor is devoted, Gillespie envisions for him the promise of making the world a better place, of defeating disease, of relieving mankind's suffering. For a devoted nurse, he envisions the high prize of marrying a doctor (and leaving nursing, of course).

The only person who meets Gillespie on anything like an equal footing is the Superintendent of Nurses, Molly Byrd (played by Alma Kruger). Indeed, in her way she is the female counterpart of Gillespie. She too has soft gray hair, middle-aged spread, and a stern look that sometimes softens with humor or affection. In her domain she is as much an authoritarian and martinet as Gillespie is, except that instead of shouting or losing her temper as Gillespie does, Molly uses sarcasm.

She has rigid standards for her nurses which she enforces sharply. To a passing nurse in *Dr. Kildare's Strange Case* who is walking down the hall with arms akimbo, Molly snaps, "Hands at your side," and then continues her conversation with the doctor. She scolds one nurse in *Dr. Kildare's Crisis* for a poor job of scrubbing floors. When the nurse protests that Dr. Carew had inspected and approved the room, Molly retorts scornfully, "He's a man. What's clean enough for a man isn't necessarily clean enough for a woman." While Gillespie is teaching his young charge the great secrets of medical practice, Molly is correcting her nurses on niggling details as in *Dr. Kildare's Victory*: "Nurse, next time you plan to wear your cap over your ear, let me know. I'll tell the other nurses, because we are all supposed to dress alike." The sarcastic humor

of the remark only lightly veils the petty authoritarianism in her orders. Molly herself seems to realize that she is a tough boss to please, for in her little speech at Mary's pre-wedding party Molly says, "I know I seem like the witch of Endor to you, but tonight I'm just one of the girls." On the other hand, it may be said on Molly Byrd's behalf that none of the nurses seems to feel any animosity toward her, and there never seems to be any problems with discipline or with proper performance of duty among those in Molly's charge.

What really makes Molly most attractive, however, is her relationship with Dr. Gillespie. She is the only person in the hospital not over-awed with the great man; and while she obeys him within the bounds of their respective positions, she clearly considers herself his equal. Their relationship might be described as a friendly feud, and Molly fires back barbed insults as fast as Gillespie hurls them. When Nurse Parker in *Dr. Kildare's Secret* fearfully warns Molly away from Gillespie because "he's not himself tonight," Molly retorts briskly, "Well, that will be a welcome change," and fearlessly walks in. Gillespie tend to greet her with such civilities as, "You blister on the heel of progress," or, "Are you here for any particular reason, or are you only going around the hospital frightening people?" Unlike Parker, who



LIONEL BARRYMORE and Nell Craig in one of their comical arguments in *Dr. Gillespie's New Assistant*.

tends to back away mutely from such outbursts with rolling eyes and pursed lips, Molly enters the fray with gusto, answering in kind: "If I ever say a nice word to you again, I hope I choke on it." When Gillespie, in *Dr. Kildare's Wedding Day*, to keep the great conductor's hearing problems a deep secret, gives Molly an obviously false explanation, she just replies blandly: "He must have an odd disease. A perfect combination—disease, odd; doctor, crazy!"

In addition to insulting one another roundly, Molly Byrd and Dr. Gillespie have a vigorous competition going, each trying to keep ahead of the other in knowing what goes on in the hospital. One of the running jokes throughout the series is that they taunt each other about what they learned through their "stooges" as in *Calling Dr. Kildare*:

Gillespie: My stooges tell me that you're starting to talk exactly like a woman selling fish off the back of a wagon.

Byrd: And my stooges tell me that you're planning to sneak out of town.

Gillespie (triumphantly): That's exactly what I told my stooges to tell you.

Despite all the insults and the competitiveness between them, Molly and Gillespie are genuine friends. Alone, they address each other by their first names and confide their serious thoughts and worries. Both are reluctant to express that affection, however, so they go on playing their feuding game. Occasionally they let someone else know how much they care for their "friendly enemy." In a serious moment in *Dr. Kildare's Crisis*, Gillespie once tells Kildare about his beloved brother dying, and Kildare replies, "I never knew you had a brother." Gillespie answers, "Nobody does around here except Molly Byrd. During the last month my brother was alive, she sat up with him day and night, trying to keep the spark alive. That's why I love her so."

In like manner, Molly speaks to others, not to Gillespie, about her genuine concern for his well-being. In many ways she tries to mother him. Surreptitiously she tries to lighten his work load by egging the internes into more intense competition for the position as Gillespie's assistant. At Molly' surging, they each take on extra cases. The nurse also sees that Gillespie eats right; it is she,

not he, who orders his meals, though he often complains of her choice or pretends that he will not eat it. In *Dr. Kildare's Strange Case* when she says she has ordered him a healthful lunch of carrots and lettuce, he says viciously, "Good! Now I'll order a rabbit to eat that stuff." Nonetheless, when she is gone, he obediently eats the "stuff" and wryly remarks to Kildare, "Maybe tomorrow, if I'm a good boy, Molly Byrd will give me some hay." Molly Byrd also monitors Gillespie's mental states and tries to help her friend. Realizing in *Dr. Kildare's Wedding Day* that Gillespie is going to be deprived of much valuable companionship when Kildare gets married, Molly tries to persuade the old doctor to take up some hobbies, to get interested in music again, to go to a symphony concert that evening. Gillespie roars in outrage, "Get out! And don't come back 'til you get over that silly female notion that a man's lonely just because he's alone." Nonetheless, he does go to the concert, and he does order a piano to be brought into his hospital bedroom. In fact, Molly is the only person that Gillespie ever obeys, although he would rather die than admit it to her.

Quite obviously, the series' writers intended for Gillespie and Molly Byrd to serve as contrasts and foils to the younger doctor-nurse couple, Kildare and Mary Lamont. The young folks fairly glow with youth, beauty and love, and they get along in perfect harmony. As they plan their future together, they agree completely on their respective roles and foresee no impediment to their continued happiness. They are, of course, the main romantic interest for all the films in which they appear together. Still, they are not nearly so interesting a couple as the older doctor and nurse with their carefully balanced relationship, their shared tragedies overcome, and their deep but veiled respect for one another. Theirs is a much richer, more equal friendship than Jimmy and Mary ever have time to learn.

Whatever Molly Byrd's faults may be, she brings some welcome strength to the rather pathetic image of nurses shown in this popular series. She is authoritarian and rather manipulative, but she is also intelligent, dedicated, compassionate, strong-willed, and flexible. She is a worthy match for the gruff but sympathetic Gillespie. Unfortunately she undermines that very strength and independence whenever she talks to Mary Lamont, for whom she serves as a surrogate mother, just as Gillespie serves as a surrogate father. Mary confides her worries—



LARAINÉ DAY and Alma Kruger in a touching moment.

especially worries about men and marriage—to the sympathetic Molly, and Molly's every answer proves that after all she too subscribes to the series' prevailing philosophy of male superiority.

In *Dr. Kildare's Crisis*, for instance, when Kildare tries to hide from Mary his fear that her brother has hereditary epilepsy, Mary confides her worry to Molly. She fearfully guesses that the only reason Kildare and Gillespie are being so mysterious is that her brother's disease must be hereditary and that she must have it, too. Instead of agreeing with Mary that she has a right to know about a matter that concerns her so personally, Molly puts her firmly in her inferior place:

Easy, there, honey! You know Jimmy Kildare loves you. And Leonard Gillespie? Huh, he'd cut off his right arm before he'd hurt you or Jimmy. Look

here, you've got working for you two of the best doctors that ever rolled a pill. Now for the love of Mike, keep your mouth shut, put a grin on your face, and be a help not a hindrance. Wash your face before you go back to work. With every patient in the place yelling for a good-looking nurse, we can't let you run around with a red nose.

Thus are the doctors elevated to gods, in whom to place all one's trust, and the nurse is demoted to a female whose main job is to look pretty for the patients. Mary obediently takes Molly's injunctions to heart and sends Jimmy her credo of faith in a note:

Dear Jimmy, Whatever you do, I know you're on my side. I have every faith in you and I love you.

Jimmy, gratified, shows the note to Gillespie, who

confirms once more that Mary has filled her proper role. "Ahhh," says he warmly, "what a fine girl."

Even more blatant examples abound. In *The People vs. Dr. Kildare*, when Jimmy is wrongly being sued for malpractice, he refuses to settle out of court because that would tacitly admit his guilt. Mary worries about a trial ruining his career, and as they work together in the nursery, she asks Molly for advice about what to tell Jimmy to do. Molly says firmly,

Smile and say 'yes' to whatever Jimmy thinks is right. I knew a man once—I tried to run his life and now here I am, taking care of other women's babies.

The implications are unmistakable: the woman must follow meekly in the man's lead or else risk losing her chances at the ultimate goal, which has repeatedly been defined in the series as marriage and motherhood.

Thus, what Molly Byrd gives to the image of the nurse with one hand she takes away with the other. Alone or in combat with the crusty Gillespie, she seems strong, competent, and quite the equal of the excellent old doctor. On the other hand, she thinks everyone should rearrange their lives and schedules to accommodate the tyrannical doctor, and she herself waits on Gillespie, clearly showing that she thinks him the most wonderful of human beings, not withstanding her feigned hostility.

This adulation of the doctor remains undimmed throughout the series. The doctor is the infallible source of healing, and the nurse is far removed from the patient—literally and symbolically. Neither Mary nor Molly nor "Nosey" do much nursing or even appear much in the vicinity of a patient. Their primary functions are to help the doctors and to make sure everyone knows how wonderful the doctors are. Interestingly enough, the doctors sometimes adopt a philosophy of healing that has been more often associated with nursing: that is, disease prevention and emphasis on the patients' ability to heal themselves without medical intervention. Gillespie tells the new internes in *Calling Dr. Kildare*, at one point, "They're going to get well by themselves, and you're going to get the credit." Gillespie, especially, effects a good many amazing "cures" just by telling people to improve their marriage or have a baby or exercise more sensibly. But the brilliant young Kildare is given to more spectacular medical treatment—especially in emergency operations,

which are always successful. Doctors are magicians; nurses are the magicians' maidservants.

It is ironic that the writers of the Kildare-Gillespie movie series felt they had exhausted their plot possibilities by the sixteenth film, for they set a pattern of medical drama which was later copied in literally hundreds of episodes, especially in the television series. In the television successor, *Doctor Kildare* (NBC 1961-1965), and in numerous others such as *Ben Casey*, *Marcus Welby*, *Medical Center*, *Trapper John* and *St. Elsewhere*, brilliant young physicians work under the wise and sometimes crusty tutelage of respected old doctors. Young nurses provide scenery, admiration, assistance, and sometimes romance for the young doctors; while older, unattractive but seasoned nurses play confidante to other older doctors and sometimes serve as combination wife-mother-partner figure to the older man, who frequently is a widower. Plot formulas are just as familiar as the characters: the doctors have some major (and often mysterious) medical problem to solve in a patient whose health problem is compounded by personal, financial, or psychological troubles. The doctors, of course, treat the whole person, first solving the psychological worries and then healing the body. The serious and noble drama is lightened with humor and with glimpses of the relationships between the doctors and the nurses.

The viewing public's continued appetite for such shows is obviously based on some deep-seated feelings. People's admiration for doctors sometimes approaches the mystical, probably because doctors are perceived as having the power of life and death in their hands. Patients need to believe that such crucial beings are endowed not only with extraordinary power and knowledge but also with great benevolence. The Dr. Kildare-Dr. Gillespie films and their imitators offered the public just that—doctors who never missed even the trickiest of diagnoses; doctors who always knew the cure, who removed the sentence of death from the patient; doctors who knew the patients, cared about them, and worked unceasingly to improve every aspect of their lives affecting their health. The physicians and nurses of Dr. Kildare's world modeled a dedication and reverence for medicine that won enduring popularity and cultivated amongst a generation of Americans, a "call for Dr. Kildare" as an idealization of the type of physician everyone sought in a medical crisis.

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