Mrs. S.M. Davis
1115 North 31st St.,
Birmingham, Alabama.

AL-53

SOME GROW OLD

By Bennett Marshall

"Some of us grow old. Some of us don't. We just hang on and on; then we die."

The wrinkled, but not unattractive woman, leaned forward, caught by her own words, and groped for more in a brain filled with the trivia of everyday.

"I guess"-and the inspiration was gone-"I'm just one of those who hang around."

"I've been in this world better than sixty years now. Nothing has ever happened to me. You'd better get somebody else to put in that book. I'm just around, been around a long time. Won't be much longer though, I think."

"Will "(her husband)" is old. He's right shaky now. He can't pass a plate at the table. Can't make a living."

And the woman who wasn't old and who won't be, who lives with the idea of not becoming old settled back to contemplate one who is very, very aged. He is a scant two years older than she.

Some of her neighbors think Mrs. Sydney May Davis a "bit touched." She's funny, they say. Yet, at an age when most women have given in to either death or senility she is maintaining besides herself and husband two children of an only son, who, upon marriage

after an early divorce, has discovered that his second wife abhors children in general and his in particular.

Mrs. Davis is a boarding house mistress. She is a type, different in only a few ways from hundreds of thousands of others throughout Birmingham, Alabama, and the entire country.

Here, in a section of Birmingham given over almost exclusively to the keeping of lodgers, she sits day after day, hampered by rheumatism, but not by age. She lives entirely for the present. The past holds no interest and the future has nothing to offer. It's apt to be much too short.

Not that the idea of death disturbs her. Agnostic to an extreme, though she is not an atheist, she has no worries upon what death will do to the body which has been hers for years. How many she won't tell. "Better than sixty" is the way she expresses it, and that's all.

Of the past she has little to say voluntarily. She dismisses it with a shrug, a smile which shows effort, and a "well what can I tell you about the house?"

The past, she says, in substances, is dead. Let it lie. But pressed, she will speak.

It's a pathetic story she tells, a tale of pathetic futility. It concerns a girl who tried to be intelligent in an era when women were still valued for brains but for beauty, for soothing, gentle hands, the bearing of children, and little else besides household drudgery.

She wanted to be a doctor. She is ending life as

the proprietress of a boarding house.

Here's the story and it's she who is telling it:

"I was born in Texas in some little town; I don't even know the name. I was the last of three kids and the wildest. Pa and I fought almost from the day I could talk until the day he died.

"I didn't even cry at his funeral.

"I got married when I was fifteen to old Doctor John D. Pitchford. Pretty? Sure I was pretty and the owner of what any old man wants in a girl who has gotten grown before her time.

"Doctor John told ma that he'd make a doctor of me if I'd marry him. I wanted to be a doctor. So we were married. He was going to send me to school. After we married, though, he didn't have much time for me in schooling.

"He died of typhoid when I was twenty-two and I was left with a baby boy and nothing else.

"So I married Will Davis, a brick mason. I was right fond of Will, and I needed a husband.

"We came to Birmingham in 1901. This wasn't much of a place then, rough and wild. It has grown up since. I started keeping boarders as soon as I bought the house here. We've been in it ever since."

The house is a two-story frame structure, so insecurely put together that a winter wind must bring great discomfort to the majority of its inhabitants. It is furnished in the heavy style of the decade which pre-

ceded the last world conflict.

"With the boarders and everything, we've had a pretty good bit of money in our time. During the war I worked for the telephone company and after it I worked in a real estate office. We sent John (the son) through Howard College and medical school and paid for his divorce, too.

"If it hadn't been for the boarders, we'd have had a hard time getting through the depression. After John got his job with the T.C.I. as a doctor, had the kids, and got the divorce, we had to take the kids. He married Louise right after he divorced Mary. Mary had got to running around and drinking. At that she was a better wife than Louise will ever be. Louise hates children. Always afraid that they're going to break something.

"Will's working hasn't been much since the years got started into thirties. He's got the palsy and that makes him not much use. He won't try to get on the WPA. He'll die pretty soon, I think, but I'd bet that he outlives me. These sickly ones always do manage to live longer. I'll just pop off one of these days."

And Sydney May Davis stopped talking. She had said enough hadn't she? She had mentioned the "kids," a girl of fifteen and a boy of thirteen. She had mentioned the seven boarders, who with what she knows to be the triflingness of all men, sometimes neglect to pay their common seven dollars a week. If I was interested, she'd tell me something about Mary, the Negro cook who has a paralyzed husband whom she wishes to get on "the dis-

(Rewrite)

ability." Texas? are sure she had managed to keep them paid, but you take forty-nine dollars a week and try to do something. It's hard. fed them people are still

"John's supposed to let us have twenty-five dollars a month to keep the kids up. But it's not always that he gets it in. Times are hard for him too. And when he married Louise he married the whole family. They're a no-good bunch.

"It takes money to send children to school. John Junior'll be starting to high school pretty soon and that means more money.

And now the woman was positive she had spoke plenty. She was tired. But not old! Even if she was going to bed at seven o'clock because her stomach hurt; even babies have stomach aches.

She is tired with the contemplation of existence. She has worked for the better part of a lifetime for something and someones who have not reciprocated. She has lived, pathetically, with two men, for either of whom she could feel more than a mild affection. She has borne one son, who, husband Will says, is an ill-tempered skunk.

It is a drab but poignant story of futility and frustration that Mrs. Davis will leave behind when she is blotted out finally and completely.

But she thinks not. It's dull to her, unspeakably dull. She isn't concerned with it. She's worried now about the stomach ache, sleep and tomorrow morning's breakfast.

Washington Copy
10/7/38
L.H.