

Condemned, jailed and left without food

The Queen Was in the Garbage

By Lila Karp.
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The Vanguard Press. \$4.95.

By NORA SAYRE

Perhaps novels about the two sexes are becoming as rare as a workable transit system. Currently, each gender seems to be peering at the other through a small knothole, or a chink in something, reporting experience strictly from one side of the fence, or the rails, or the sheets—or whatever barrier is most convenient. Since most of the chink-reports are sexual, one sometimes longs for a book about men and women: a fiction to revive the old fantasy that it takes two. So many novels suggest that even the battle of the sexes has yielded to their mutual isolation. But naturally, most writers can record only what they know—which is frustration. The rondo-theme is that both sexes have been condemned, jailed and left without food by the other. It hardly sounds like a revolution.

This deft, defiant first novel details the sufferings of Harriet, a divorced New Yorker who flees a stifling family and a numbing husband to live in London with Robert, "a loveless maniac." Pregnant by and miserable with him, she revisits New York and has a premature baby, which dies in the novel's last sentence. Billows of her past surge back during 14 ferocious hours on the delivery table: a baleful, remembered chorus of relatives and lovers forces her to relive every accident or error. The most vicious voice is her mother's: "Everything you touch turns to poison. Those disgusting boils. You've got them because you've got a rotten mind and rotten blood. That's what you've got. Rotten blood." The terse, staccato dialogue is accurate: for the unforgivable things said by those who are (intolerably) intimate with one another.

Harriet's perfectly straightforward hang-ups are worth hearing, because they are so very widely shared in the cool 1960's. Marriage either means "playing dead" (relinquishing one's own life in order to please), or being an "apron-

Miss Sayre is New York correspondent for *New Statesman*.



Sculpture by Milton Heald.

string strangler" (shrewhood as an alternative to total submission). In short, marriage seems ruinous to the character. Also, the mere thought of marriage ignites every fear "from abandonment to annihilation." (Of course, there's always Santayana's observation that "It takes patience to appreciate domestic bliss; volatile spirits prefer unhappiness.") Rather humbly, Harriet wonders what "normal" is—and the author's honesty denies her any guideposts. Throughout, there's the valid terror of repetition: of one's own past, or of one's parents' mistakes. Even a chance parallel or a coincidence can seem like a hideous recreation of what one's seen—or done—or feared.

All these nodes of anguish are well drawn, and Lila Karp is clear about confusion; it's an accomplishment to map chaos with such skill. The book's only weakness is the vagueness of the men. Robert seems to emerge from a time-machine; he was apparently yanked out of the British plays of the late 1950's, bristling with the motiveless malignity of those who were modeled on John Osborne heroes. As in many women's-experience novels, men are beasts, but very nebulous beasts, popping in and out of the plot to be cruel on cue. But Miss Karp's distinct talent can probably produce an earthier villain or lover for her next book, and perhaps even a richer range of reference. ■