

Libra: Partnership

Mike lit the Bunsen burner, studied the experiment a moment, and stood back with a satisfied sigh. It was working beautifully, and if he could just follow it through he would have a chemistry project to write up that should please even Mr. Turner.

Mike's face fell at the thought of writing it up. He was good at chemistry, and the kids called him a "whiz" at math. But when it came to writing, Mike just couldn't measure up. He knew what he was doing, but never seemed able to get the right words down on paper to explain the whys, why nots, wherefores, and hows, of his experiments. Mr. Turner was such a stickler for having every step in the process carefully explained in the written report, that no matter how good the experiment was, he'd get a bad grade if the report didn't match.

A jarring crash at the other side of the lab interrupted Mike's thoughts. "Oh, not again!" wailed Jan, who was taking chemistry only because she needed it to get into college, and having more than a rough time. Mike lowered the flame under his burner and went over to Jan, grinning. "What happened this time?"

"I was trying to pour the liquid into this test tube and the whole thing slipped out of my hand." Jan desolately surveyed the mess on the floor. "I'll never get this project worked up — and I'll never pass the course if I don't. Might as well forget college right now."

"Hey, cheer up. It can't be that bad." Mike started mopping the liquid with a rag. "C'mon, let's clean this up."

As they worked, an idea began to form in Mike's mind, and when they had finished he asked Jan to look at his experiment. She looked half-heartedly without

really seeing and said, "It looks great. Your stuff is always great. You could get an A in this course blindfolded."

"Oh, that's not what I mean," said Mike impatiently. "What do you think of this? Mr. Turner said we could do our experiments with partners, right? So, suppose I do this and explain it to you, and you write it up. How's that?"

Jan's face slowly began to brighten as she considered the idea. If there was anything she *could* do it was write. She had been writing stories for years, was on the school paper, and the English teacher almost always read her composition to her class. "Hey, neat!" she exclaimed, and then regarded Mike dubiously. "Are you sure you want to explain all that to me? I probably wouldn't even understand it the first time around."

"Quit worrying," said Mike. "If you don't I'll explain it again — and again. You'll get it, and I'd sure be glad not to have to write it up."

And so it was settled. Jan sat down and watched, while Mike carefully explained every step as he went along. Just as she had feared, she did not understand it all, but Mike, who wanted to perfect the experiment anyhow, agreed to return after school the next day and run through the whole thing from the beginning.

Next day Jan, who had stopped worrying about her own failures and therefore was able to concentrate better, had much less trouble following Mike's explanations, and even discovered that the answers to some general questions she had always been too embarrassed to ask in class seemed to fall into place as a result of what Mike was doing.

On the third day they tried once more, and this time Jan was able to tell Mike, step by step, what to do, and felt she was ready to write up the experiment.

This she did over the weekend, and after Mike read

it through on Monday he looked at her admiringly and said, "That's a great job. I could never have done that."

"Oh, of course you could have. You explained it all to me, didn't you? And you *know* I can't understand a chemistry explanation unless it's very *very* simple and clear. I understand your experiment and I understand more about chemistry, just because of your explanation."

"O.K." laughed Mike, "you convinced me. Next one of these I do, I'll try to write it up and you see if you understand it."

"Fine," said Jan. "Bet I will, too."

Several days later, Mr. Turner was discussing the projects in class. "Jan and Mike," he said, "yours is one of the best collaborations I've ever seen. That experiment is very sophisticated — something I've come to expect from Mike — but he's never given me such a concise, complete report before. And Jan, I know you couldn't write up the experiment that well unless you really understand it. And if you do understand it, you've learned a great deal."

"I do understand it, Mr. Turner," smiled Jan, "and chemistry is even starting to make some sense to me. There's something else I understand now, too, though, and that's the value of working together. I guess we've all got to learn to do everything ourselves, but sometimes we can learn a lot when someone who can do one thing and someone who can do another thing get together and help each other."