When Jovanka lit up Bridge Chess Club

Jovanka’s co-author of The Mating Game, James Essinger, reports on a memorable evening

On the night of Tuesday September 20th, 2016, members of Bridge Chess Club, which is located in the small village of Bridge about three miles south of Canterbury, had the great treat of a guest visit from Jovanka Houkska IM, the British Women’s Chess Champion, fresh from her remarkable good performance on board one for the England Women’s Team at the Chess Olympiad in Baku.

Jovanka was visiting me in Canterbury to discuss the marketing and launch plans of our novel The Mating Game. I suggested to our team captain, Graeme Boxall (who has a small cameo in the novel as the captain of a container ship: his surname seemed particularly appropriate) that Jovanka might play in a local derby match between the two Bridge teams — Bridge A and Bridge B — scheduled for the Tuesday evening. Jovanka was very interested in playing, partly as it had been a long time since she had played for a local club, and, of course, I was keen to get her to play board one for my team, Bridge A, for the crucial match.

In her game, Jovanka played very well against talented Bridge junior Michael Green, who proved a tough opponent for her. The game against Michael is below.

And so things proved. Our game was exciting and filled with chances for both players. Here’s what happened.

J. Essinger — A. Wismans
Thanet League 2016
Sicilian Najdorf

1 e4 c5 2 f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 xd4 f6
5 c3 a6

Arnaud plays the famous Sicilian Najdorf, named of course after the great Argentinean player who stayed in Argentina when World War II broke out in 1939 and made a new life for himself there. Alas, Najdorf’s entire family, back in his native Poland, were slaughtered in the Holocaust.

Against the Najdorf I like to play the well-known 6 g5 variation as I find it very flexible and it isn’t too difficult to develop my pieces quickly which I always like to do if I can. 6 g5 e6 7 f4 e7 8 f3 c7 9 0-0 0-0 10 bd7 10 d3 b5 11 he1 b7

This is a crucial position and so far all book, although Arnaud didn’t in fact know the theory and was admirably improvising. In this position it is essential, I think, that Black fianchettoes his light-squared bishop to put more pressure on White’s e4-pawn. It is a serious mistake, instead, to play 11...b4?, because in this position White can simply play 12 d5! and usually obtains a much better, and often winning, position.

I didn’t really know what to do next exactly, and was now improvising myself. I liked the idea of playing 12 g4 because at some point if Black castles short then I want to attack on the kingside as quickly as possible. The move 12 g4 also has the advantage that it prevents Black from playing 12...h5. It also prepares f5 better in some variations. However, whether 12 g4 is actually the best move here or whether I should play something such as 12 h3 or 12 g3, I don’t know. I’m not using a computer to help me with my analysis, because obviously I didn’t use one when I was playing the game!

12 g4 0-0 13 a3

Again, I think Arnaud chose one of the best moves, if not the best move in the position. My reply is probably not very good, but I wanted to delay ...b4 by Black or prevent it. The problem if White allows ...b4 is that it’s not clear to me where the knight on c3 can go: if it goes to e2, it blocks the defence of the pawn on e4, if it goes back to b1, it just looks a bit silly, and now, of course, that the black knight is on c5, putting it on a4 is not an option, and even if it was safe to do that, probably I wouldn’t want to, knights on the rim being famous for being dim.

13...0-0-0 14 f1

I’m going to be a bit conceited here and give this move an exclamation mark. It seems to me a good move because, for one thing, it puts pressure on Black to play something that gives some idea of what his plan is. It also prevents the light-squared bishop being exchanged, and it prepares the bishop to go possibly to g2 or h3, if the opportunity arises.

14... 0-0-0

I made this move mainly to protect the bishop in a variation where I play e5 at some point (but obviously not yet as I like my queen!), and to avoid my dark-squared bishop being lose in the event of ...dxe5; fxe5. 15 h4 is also useful if I play f5. I might also be interested in putting my bishop on h3 at some point and the move h2–h4 also again has the advantage of obliging Arnaud to declare his plan.

15... 0-0-0

With the idea of playing ...b4 at some point and possibly obtaining pressure down the b-file.

16 f5

I had more or less abandoned now the idea of playing e5 after I’d moved my queen off the f3-square. I didn’t really see what e5 was going to achieve for me any more, especially as Black is preparing to double on the d-file. I wanted to try and create some pressure on the kingside, and now that the black knight is no longer on d7 then creating a hole on e5 isn’t such a problem.
16...e5 17 b3
I thought that my pawns would be likely to
get doubled at some point, but I didn’t mind too
much as I saw that I had pressure now on the
half-open d-file and also if the knight on c5 is
exchanged off, the pressure against e4 is reduced.
Arnaud did, indeed, exchange the knights.

After the game Arnaud said that he thought
this was a mistake as it gave my bishop a strong
square on c4, which indeed it does. I’m not
exactly sure what Black should be doing here,
but one idea would be to move the king to b8
and bring the king’s rook over to c8. I think
perhaps ...b4, while playable at some point, is
rather premature here as Arnaud doesn’t have
many pieces supporting the queen.

19 axb4 xb4

20 xf6
I think this is a good move because it gives
me a nice opportunity to play my knight to d5
in some variations and also radically relieves
the pressure on e4. Arnaud’s dark-squared
bishop isn’t doing very much with his pawn
formation being what it is and I’m not
particularly afraid of it at this stage. I did
briefly consider bringing my bishop back to
d2 (of course, not 20 e3? as that leaves
the pawn on e4 up for grabs), but I discarded
the idea of 20 d2, as it seemed a very
passive move, and also blocks the d-file.

I tend to think in chess that one should
only move pieces backwards if there is a very
good reason to do so. I think my 14 f1 was
quite useful as the bishop, as we’ll see, plays a
very active part in the game shortly. Probably
objectively 20 xf6 is one of the best moves in
this position, even though maybe it isn’t the
very best move.

20...xf6?
I think Arnaud should take back with the g-
pawn which at least prevents what White is
about to try to do and also gives his king’s rook
a potential open g-file. I wouldn’t be too worried
if I were Arnaud about the dark-squared bishop
being hemmed in because it can come back into
play via d8 and b6 at some point in some
variations and potentially has a really great
square on d4. In fact, 20 xf6 is probably a
blunder because of what I’ve got in store.

21 g5 d8 22 f6!
Carrying with it a threat to win the
exchange, this move is also dangerous because
I can take on g7 with a gain of tempo against
the rook and, in some variations, if I can check
on f5 with my queen I will then have xf7 which
is pretty lethal. In the event, Arnaud
didn’t spot the threat to win the exchange, but
all the same, even after I won it, he played really
well and made things very difficult for me.

22 gxf6 23 h3 fxg5 24 xd7+ xd7
25 xf7+ e7

It’s looking pretty good for White here, of
course, but it’s not quite as easy as you might
imagine, and I was aware of this during the
game. For one thing, I don’t really want Black
to play ...xb3 which will start to bring a lot
of pressure to bear around my king and also
there is potential for Black to play ...f8 at
some point and bring his rook down to f2,
potentially creating mating threats.

26 xc7 27 hgx5 xb3
I had a good long think here. The move I
decided on was to prevent Black taking the g5-
pawn with check in some variations and also
to give myself a chance to put at least one of my
rooks on c1 with discovered threats against the
black king. However, effectively the move I play
loses a tempo which Arnaud exploits with a
move that could instantaneously have turned the
tables in the game if I hadn’t been very careful.

28 b1 zb8!

In chess, like life, it’s usually best to be direct.
Arnaud’s move, of course, threatens mate in two
after 29 xe4+. I saw this right away and was
rather dismayed to find that despite being the
exchange ahead my king is looking very weak.
It’s important, I think, if you must play defensive
moves, to try to keep the momentum of your
offensive in place. Anyway, I don’t really have
very much choice about my next move unless I
want to do something really passive like 29 f2.

29 d2

Absolutely vital to defend against the
threatened mate and to gain some control of
the second rank. When I calculated the need to
play 29 d2 I did consider what would happen
if Black now takes my knight with his queen.
Obviously if I just recapture with the b-pawn
then after 30 xe4+ Black is winning my
queen and also is going to end up better as the
bishops are going to be scything all over the place. Unfortunately for Black there is a major snag if he does takes the knight with his queen, but what else does he have? Once White plays 30 \texttt{Qxc1} he will have consolidated.

30...\texttt{Bxc6} 31 \texttt{Qxc1}

In retrospect, playing through the game, this move looks totally obvious, but at the time I was worried, probably irrationally to some extent, by the move 30 \texttt{Qxe4+}, although it doesn’t work, of course, because the queen is going to be pinned in all variations and there isn’t going to be a mate for Black. What I didn’t see though, is that Arnaud can simply take my rook and go into an ending which is not quite as bad as you might imagine as he has two bishops for the queen and quite a lot of play.

31 \texttt{Bxc6+} 32 \texttt{Qxc6}

And now I had another long think. Obviously I can’t play 30 \texttt{Qxh7} because the bishop picks up the pawn on g5 and wins an exchange back. I did consider 30 \texttt{Qh2} which puts pressure on the h-pawn and ensures it will be won, but I wasn’t comfortable about giving Arnaud the open c-file after 30 \texttt{Qxc8}, so I thought it was safest to gain that file myself which also may give me in some variations the chance of bringing my queen to c7 and then to c7.

32 \texttt{Bxc2} 33 \texttt{Qf8}

Wisely, the Wisman grabs the f-file. The game now starts getting very complicated and quite a lot of play. The game was in many ways a typical club game. Plenty of action, chances on both sides, and the usual fundamental rules of chess applying – in particular that extra space and extra development give a player an edge, and that winning material when you can afford to do so without being positionally compromised is always a good idea. However, the fact that Black could have created the position I mentioned where the rook and bishop were on the g-file and the queen was inflicting the pin, and that this position was really unclear, shows that Arnaud’s loss was, alas for me, more due to time pressure than my play.

Here is the game Jovanka won against Michael Green. I don’t presume to annotate games in which one or more of the players are higher-rated than me, and in this case both Jovanka and Michael are.

M. Green-J. Houska

Threatening to win either the bishop or the rook, but I did see there is a way out viz. 30...\texttt{e5} 31 \texttt{Qf1} when my intended 30...\texttt{Qf2} would be an embarrassing blunder on account of 38...\texttt{e3+}! White can instead move the queen somewhere on the g-file when we have an interesting position where the bishop is pinned against the rook and the rook’s mobility is limited. On the other hand, Black has rook, bishop and queen for pawn and, of course, if I move my queen the pin is no longer there.

The game at this point would have become very complicated and very difficult. Looking at the position I think at some point I could probably win Black’s a-pawn or d-pawn with my queen, but whether that would be enough to win the game is a moot point. For example, if I do move my queen and relieve the pin against the rook, Arnaud could plonk his bishop on f4 where his pawn on e5 will anchor it forever on a great square. As things turned out, Arnaud prevented me from having to worry about this because he didn’t