

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 Houska IM, the British Women's Chess Champion, fresh from her remarkably 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.

I myself was pitted against a good friend of mine, the Dutch psychology academic Arnaud Wisman. I knew in advance that I'd be White as my team, Bridge A, were nominally the visitors for this local derby and so we had White on the even board numbers. I knew it would be a tough fight against Arnaud – we are about equally matched when it comes to chess ability and over the years we've had some tempestuous fights on the board. We're both tactical players and I think it's fair to say too that we're both reasonably creative players and are quite good at finding unusual and dangerous ideas over the board.

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

J.Essinger-A. Wisman
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 lets me 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 ♘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 the well-known temporary piece sacrifice 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 g2-g4 also has the advantage that it prevents Black from playing ...♗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 ♘c5 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...♗dd7 15 h4

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 loose 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...♖b6

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.

17...♗xb3 18 cxb3 b4?!

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



Ahead of the Bridge derby, Michael Green (right) prepares to take on IM Jovanka Houska.

the rook and, in some variations, if I can check on f5 with my queen I will then have ♖xh7 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 fxf5 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 ♖f5+

I played this move not to do a spite check, but to put my queen on a better square and keep it in touch with the pawn on g5. The problem is, though, that by doing this I lose contact with the pawn on b3. My thought processes during the game at this point were that I thought I was better, but I was a bit worried about the two black bishops and what would happen if they got liberated. Also, I didn't like the half-open c-file and Black's potential for counterplay on the queenside, so I felt the game still had a long way to go.

26...♖c7 27 hxg5 ♖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 instantly have turned the tables in the game if I hadn't been very careful.

28 ♖b1 ♗b8!

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 take the knight with his queen, but what else does he have? Once White plays 30 ♖c1 he will have consolidated.

29... ♗xc3 30 ♖c1

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... ♗xe4+, 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.

30... ♖xc1+ 31 ♗xc1 ♗b6

And now I had another long think. Obviously I can't play 30 ♗xh7 because the bishop picks up the pawn on g5 and wins an exchange back. I did consider 30 ♖h2 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... ♖c8+, 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 d7 and then to c7.

32 ♖c2 ♖f8

Wisely, the Wisman grabs the f-file. The game now starts getting very complicated and quite worrying for White. I don't really have much choice about my next move, although I could have played 33 ♗h3 which would have prevented the rook from coming into f1. However, I do then lose the g-pawn without grabbing the h-pawn and if Arnaud can secure his bishop on g5 and his pawn on h6, those pieces are unassailable unless I give up a rook for the bishop and pawn in some lines.

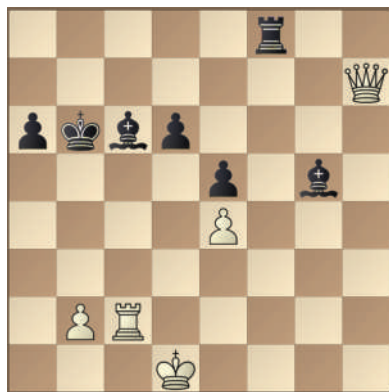
33 ♗xh7

I saw that whether Arnaud began checking me on f1 or by taking the pawn on g5, I would still end up in a safe enough position with my king, but what I hadn't seen was the threat that Arnaud's light-squared bishop could present.

33... ♗xg5+ 34 ♗d1?

I think this is a mistake because actually the king is more vulnerable on d1 than it would be on b1 as there it may have the option of escaping the pressure to a2. After my move things start to get rather hairy as Arnaud finds the most active move to keep the game going.

34... ♗c6



I looked at this position for some time and was pretty worried about it. My queen is not

doing very much and Black's king is pretty safe from checks at this moment unless he moves his bishop on c6 to b5 because obviously then ♗c7 would be mate.

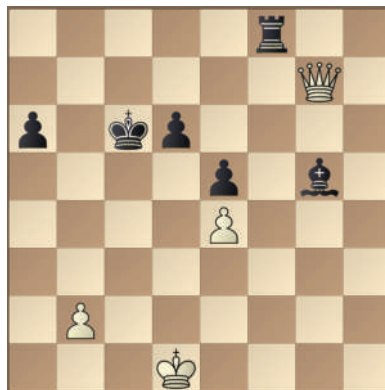
The more I looked at my position, the more difficult it seemed. Arnaud is threatening 35... ♖f1+ 36 ♗e2 ♗b5, mating rather picturesquely, and it is not easy to avoid this. I did consider the move 35 ♖c3, but after 35... ♗a4+ I need to interpose b3 and I'm then going to have a lot of pressure to deal with from Black's rook and dark-squared bishop. I was worried that all my hard work in this game could suddenly turn into a disaster with the bishops shooting lines of aggressive power everywhere. So I decided that I had to take some radical action.

35 ♖xc6+ ♗xc6

I didn't see much alternative, but to give up my rook for the alarmingly powerful light-squared bishop. After the game, Jovanka, who watched quite a bit of my game as I was sitting next to her, told me she was sure I had to take the bishop on c6.

Only now did I see a tactical trick, although it shouldn't have worked. I was helped by Arnaud being very short of time at this point. The time control in Thanet League games is 36 moves in 90 minutes, then the clock is put back fifteen minutes for the rest of the moves, so basically you have one and three-quarter hours for all your moves.

36 ♗g7



Threatening to win either the bishop or the rook, but I did see there is a way out viz. 36... ♖f1+ 37 ♗e2 ♖g1 when my intended 38 ♗f2? would be an embarrassing blunder on account of 38... ♗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 pawn for queen 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

see this possible way out. **36... ♖b8? 37 ♗xg5** This is obviously a winning move even if Arnaud hadn't blundered now. **37... ♗xb2??** Whereupon, of course, I played: **38 ♗c1+ 1-0**

This 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 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

Thanet League 2016

Reti Opening

1 ♖f3 d5 2 c4 c6 3 b3 ♗f5 4 g3 e6 5 ♗g2 ♖f6 6 0-0 ♗d6 7 d3 h6 8 ♗bd2 0-0 9 ♗b2 ♗h7 10 a3 a5 11 ♖a2 ♗bd7 12 ♗a1 ♖e8 13 ♗e5 ♗xe5 14 ♗xe5 ♗f8 15 cxd5 exd5 16 ♗xf6 ♗xf6 17 ♗xf6 gxf6 18 ♗f3 ♗f5 19 d4 b6 20 e3 ♖ac8 21 ♗h4 ♗e6 22 ♗d1 ♖ed8 23 ♗f1 c5 24 dxc5 bxc5 25 ♖ad2 ♖b8 26 ♗c4



26... dxc4 27 ♖xd8 ♖xd8 28 ♖xd8 c3 29 ♗d1 ♗xb3 30 ♖c1 c2 31 ♗f3 c4 32 ♗d4 ♗xa3 33 ♖xc2 ♗xc2 34 ♗xc2 ♗b2 35 ♗f1 ♗f8 36 g4 ♗e7 37 f4 ♗d6 38 h4 ♗c5 39 h5 a4 40 g5 fxg5 41 fxg5 hxg5 0-1

Bridge A won the seven-board match 5-2. It was extremely exciting and fun for us all to have Jovanka visiting our club for the evening. Not only is Jovi, as numerous photographs of her in this august journal testify, a woman of great beauty, but she is also very friendly, ready to share her chess talent and advice with lower-ranked players, and has a most delightful and charming nature. I am proud to be her co-author on *The Mating Game*, and I'm very proud to know her.