

San Francisco Daily Morning Call
June 29, 1864

The Kahn of Tartary

Lena Kahn, otherwise known as Mother Kahn, or the Kahn of Tartary, who is famous in this community for her infatuated partiality for the Police Court as a place of recreation, was on hand there again yesterday morning. She was mixed up in a triangular row, the sides of the triangle being Mr. Oppenheim, Mrs. Oppenheim, and herself. It appeared from the evidence that she formed the base of the triangle—which is to say, she was at the bottom of the row, and struck the first blow. Moses Levi, being sworn, said he was in the neighborhood, and heard Mrs. Oppenheim scream; knew it was her by the vicious expression she always threw into her screams; saw the defendant (her husband) go into the Tartar's house and gobble up the partner of his bosom and his business, and rescue her from the jaws of destruction (meaning Mrs. Kahn,) and bring her forth to sport once more amid the _____. At this point the lawyer turned off Mr. Levi's gas, which seemed to be degenerating into poetry, and asked him what his occupation was? The Levite said he drove an express wagon. The lawyer—with that sensitiveness to the slightest infringement of the truth, which is so becoming to the profession—inquired severely if he did not sometimes drive the horse also! The wretched witness, thus detected before the multitude in his deep-laid and subtle prevarication, hung his head in silence. His evidence could no longer be respected, and he moved away from the stand with the consciousness written upon his countenance of how fearful a thing it is to trifle with the scruples of a lawyer. Mrs. Oppenheim next came forward and gave a portion of her testimony in damaged English, and the balance in dark and mysterious German. In the English glimpses of her story it was discernible that she had innocently trespassed upon the domain of the Khan, and had been rudely seized upon in such a manner as to make her arm turn blue, (she turned up her sleeve and showed the Judge) and the bruise had grown worse since that day, until at last it was tinged with a ghastly green, (she turned up her sleeve again for impartial judicial inspection) and instantly after receiving this affront, so humiliating to one of gentle blood, she had been set upon without cause or provocation, and thrown upon the floor and "licked." This last expression possessed a charm for Mrs. Oppenheim, that no persuasion of Judge or lawyers could induce her to forego, even for the sake of bringing her wrongs into a stronger light, so long as those wrongs, in such an event, must be portrayed in language less pleasant to her ear. She said the Khan had licked her, and she stuck to it and reiterated with unflinching firmness. Becoming confused by repeated assaults from the lawyers in the way of badgering questions, which her wavering senses could no longer comprehend, she relapsed at last into hopeless German again, and retired within the lines. Mr. Oppenheim then came forward and remained under fire for fifteen minutes, during which time he made it as plain as the disabled condition of his English would permit him to do, that he was not in anywise to blame, at any rate; that his wife went out after a warrant for the arrest of the Kahn; that she stopped to "make it up" with the Kahn, and the redoubtable Kahn tackled her; that he was dry-nursing the baby at the time, and when he heard his wife scream, he suspected, with a sagacity which did him credit, that she wouldn't have "hollered' dout dere vas someding de matter" therefore he piled the child up in a corner remote from danger, and moved upon the works of the Tartar; she had waltzed into

the wife and finished her, and was already on picket duty, waiting for the husband, and when he came she smacked him over the head a couple of times with the deadly bludgeon she uses to elevate linen to the clothes-line with; and then, stimulated by this encouragement, he started to the Police Office to get out a warrant for the arrest of the victorious army, but the victorious army, always on the alert, was there ahead of him, and he now stood in the presence of the Court in the humiliating position of a man who had aspired to be plaintiff, but overcome by strategy, had sunk to the grade of defendant. At this point his mind wandered, his vivacious tongue grew thick with mushy German syllables, and the last of the Oppenheims sank to rest at the feet of justice. We had done less than our duty had we allowed this most important trial—freighted, as it was, with matters of the last importance to every member of this community, and every conscientious, law-abiding man and woman upon whom the sun of civilization shines today—to be given to the world in the columns, with no more elaboration than the customary “Benjamin Oppenheim, assault and battery, dismissed; Lena Oppenheim and Fredrika Kahn, held to answer.” We thought, at first, of starting in that way, under the head of “Police Court,” but a second glance at the case showed us that it was one of a most serious and extraordinary nature, and ought to be put in such a shape that the public could give to it that grave and deliberate consideration which its magnitude entitled it to.

(Source: Twainquotes.com, <http://twainquotes.com/18640629.html>)