THOSE OSBORNES AGAIN

Recently, in an old scrapbook of my mother's, I found this paragraph she had copied from the old Bulletin of perhaps 1890 vintage, with a note by her that this was what was said of her "noble family":

"You couldn't fire a Gatling gun in this State and not hit an Osborne. They run a family club practically to themselves; at best you cannot enter that club if an Osborne says 'No'. The family is by way of having family portraits and ancestors, it seems. An antiquarian in the Sydney Mail tells that the first Osborne settled in the Illawarra District some 50 years ago when you could buy land at a shilling an acre. And he left 8 sons who must have been blessedly meek, they inherited so much of the earth."

That particular Osborne must have been Henry, though he was not the first to settle here, and it was more than fifty years beforehand when he did; moreover, even Henry had to pay a bit more than a shilling per acre. But he did set his sons up nicely with at least one huge grazing property each and, in consequence, the deep respect of their bank managers. The sons had large families, though perhaps the reference to the indiscriminate firing of a Gatling may be an exaggeration. The Gatling, it will be recalled, was the gun which jammed after the colonel was dead and the regiment was blinded by dust and smoke, the well-timed jamming of the mechanism being the sure signal that it was time to "Play up, play up, and Play the Game!"

That paragraph was written in the days when the Bulletin was not disposed to show reverence for anything much at all. Yet I am sure my mother copied it in much the same spirit, because she was a light-hearted, amusing lass in her youth, as I have always heard, and was rather inclined to a bit of impish irreverence herself. Indeed, she could tell a good story or two about those light-hearted kinsfolk of hers. One such story was of the time when some of the bright sparks were staying at Petty's Hotel on a visit to the city. After living it up in Sydney, they needed a good night's rest, which however was denied them by someone who would not stop hammering away on a piano in a nearby room. At last the noise was too much. Invading the room, the Osborne boys trundled the piano onto the balcony and upended it into Clarence Street, with a fine reverberation of breaking timbers and twanging strings. A cheque to buy a new instrument was a small enough cost to them for some much-needed sleep.

Then there was the time when another group of Osbornes were at a large society wedding at the Australia. It was an evening-dress
affair, naturally. Fashionable decor at the time demanded lots of Kentia palms in pots throughout the vestibules and passage-ways of the famous hotel. While the festivities were in progress some of the Osborne blades were apparently struck by the silliness of rows of top-hats resting, brims up and empty, on the cloakroom counter. The result was that when the reception ended many of the guests emerged to find the cloakroom transformed into a conservatory, a graceful grove of Kentia palms re-potted into the many silk toppers.

I feel certain that our President would agree with me that nobody even bearing the Osborne name nowadays would do such things, if only because silk top-hats are even more rare than Kentia palms. But I am equally sure that many a staid citizen of Sydney in those heady days could have said that Illawarra had a lot to answer for, fervently hoping that the Gatling would fire accurately, and not jam its mechanism.

—EDGAR BEALE.