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A SWISS LAKE FLEET.

By John W. Harries.

In the 128 years since pleasure steamers first began to ply on the usually placid waters of Lake Léman, or the Lake of Geneva as it is more commonly called, many generations of British tourists have waxed enthusiastic over the beauty of its shores and reflected on the history in stone and mortar revealed by its cities and châteaux from Geneva to Lausanne, Chillon to Thonon. Even the names of the smaller ports — Versoix, Céligny, Yvoire, Vevey, Montreux, Clarens — read with the lilt of a poem and have inspired their own nostalgic references in books and diaries and letters by enchanted Britons who have visited them.

Unhappily, the hiatus of the war years, coupled with the post-hostilities' period of currency penury, which was no less long, have combined to deny to a younger generation the manifold delights and attractions of the Lake of Geneva and its surroundings. Ideal for holidays — and an excellent way to get to know these pleasant lands of Swiss Geneva and Vaud and French Savoy is from the water, on board one of the comfortable and well-found vessels of the Compagnie Générale de Navigation sur le Lac Léman (C.G.N.).

The largest lake in Switzerland, with a maximum length of forty-five miles, maximum breadth of 8½ miles and its greatest depth giving more than 168 fathoms, the scenery ranges from Europe's highest mountain and the majestic chain of the Alps to the softer contours of the Juras; vineyards lean over towards the shore before and beyond Lausanne while incomparable smiling country graces both sides of the Lake as it narrows and turns in the direction of Geneva. The young Rhône, rising in the Gletsch and fed by the Rhône Glacier itself, runs cold and clear into the Eastern extremity of the Lake between Villeneuve and Le Bouveret and flows out at the Geneva end under the Bridge of Mont-Blanc, past the Isle of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and thence on its long journey through France to Provence and the sea in the vicinity of Marseilles.

So much could be written around and about Lake Léman, whether it be of a war flotilla equipped by the City of Geneva which put the harassing Savoyards to flight in 1536; the famous painting, "La Pêche Miraculeuse", by Conrad Witz who, instead of the arid country of Galilee, used the verdant shore of the Lake of Geneva for the background to his "Miraculous Draught of Fishes"; or of a book with same name, "La Pêche Miraculeuse" by Guy de Pourtalès, the Geneva writer, which has been translated into English. These and many other aspects suiting all interests deserve the attention of visitors.

Ignoring the futilities of the Talking Shop of Geneva whilst admiring the beautiful setting of the United Nations Palace, the voyager sets out in one of the vessels of the C.G.N. on the 3½ hour journey to Ouchy, the port of Lausanne, *via* ports on the Swiss side of the Lake. Or the pleasant trip may be continued for another two hours to the Franco-Swiss frontier at St. Gingolph under the mountains on the opposite side. Meals are served on board all the vessels of the C.G.N. but passengers can, for instance,

disembark at Ouchy to lunch there and to see something of Lausanne, continuing by an early afternoon sailing for the remainder of the tour of the Swiss coast.

Alternately, a trip can be made across the Lake from Ouchy to the French towns of Evian and Thonon. In any case, the return passage to Geneva may be made *via* the French coast. For those who have wider views on fresh water than merely as an element to wash in or to see running under bridges, Evian is notable in its claim to have sources of the purest drinking water in the world. The old Romans knew about this and came to Evian for a cure after their guzzling and gormandising.

Where the Grand-Lac narrows between Nyon on the Swiss side and Yvoire on the French to enter the Petit-Lac, it is interesting to read that not so very long ago, as time is measured, pirates used to set out from the Savoy coast to intercept the "barques du Léman" — two lateen sails since time immemorial — carrying merchandise. Incidentally, the last existing sailing vessel of the type, "barques du Léman", named *La Vaudoise*, has happily been preserved by some ship-lovers who call their Society by the intriguing name of "Confrérie des Pirates d'Ouchy". More power to their elbows!

A great advantage for the tourist when much has to be crowded into a comparatively short stay is that return tickets by the C.G.N. are interchangeable with



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the Swiss National Railways. A return, say, from Lausanne to Geneva, can therefore be made in forty minutes, the powerful electric locomotive touching over eighty miles an hour on a track singularly free, for Switzerland, from curves and gradients.

By the total tonnage of its fleet as well as by the size of its individual vessels, the C.G.N. heads the list of owners operating on the Swiss lakes. Without evidence to the contrary, it could well be that to-day the C.G.N., in the number of units, is the world's leading owner of Paddlers?

Perhaps because the C.G.N. is the only Company operating on Lake Léman which holds a concession from the Swiss Federal Authorities, a concession which is recognised by the French Government, changing the funnel colours is simplified. Although the hull colourings have remained unchanged — white with a thin dark blue band at bottom of bulwark plate on top of orange boot-topping, also white upper-works — the large tapering funnels were, until 1922, white with a black top. Then yellow with a black top was tried with the three largest units, *La Suisse*, *Simplon* and *Helvétie*, and being considered more successful, the funnels of the other vessels were gradually given the same livery. The three motor vessels, however, have white funnels but differing to this extent: *Léman*, all white; *Genève*, white with black band near top, and *Lausanne*, white with a very narrow band, barely discernible.

All vessels, with two exceptions, were built and engined by the famous firm of Sulzer Frères of Winterthur. The two exceptions, *Léman* and *Major-Davel*, by Escher Wyss of Zurich. There are likewise two exceptions in the type of engines in the steamers of the fleet, namely the *Helvétie*, which has three cylinders "uniflow", and the *Major-Davel*, triple expansion. All the other steamers are driven by an inclined type of two cylinders and compound expansion with drop valves. The converted P.M.V's, *Genève* and *Lausanne*, have been given diesel electric engines of the type, "Talisman", which was constructed in 1934-35 by A. & J. Inglis, Ltd., for the (regretted) L. & N. E. Railway Co., and fitted by the English Electric Co., Ltd.

The *Genève* was originally fitted with the usual machinery of her epoch for a paddle steamer and was, in her early days, considered the most elegant, as she was also the most popular, ship on the Lake. This

popularity had an unhappy sequel: In September, 1898, the Empress Elisabeth of Austria expressed a desire to make a trip in her. While the Empress was standing on the Quai de Mont-Blanc at Geneva waiting to go on board the vessel, she was attacked by the anarchist, Luccheni. Thinking that she was unhurt (the stiletto used was so fine that no immediate pain was felt by the victim, the haemorrhage being internal and thus unperceived), the Empress went on board and the trip began. Before long, however, the Empress fainted and the *Genève* was turned back to land her. She died shortly afterwards in the Beau Rivage Hotel.

Léman, veteran, three years short of her centenary, is worthy of brief comment: she now has two diesel motors, one for each propeller, and is the only screw-driven vessel in the fleet. Once a graceful paddler, she is equally handsome as a motor vessel. A certain amount of renovation was carried out in 1874, but her beautiful lines saved the hull from transformation in 1894 when new engines and boilers were fitted. The final transformation on the design of Monsieur Ed. Meystre, Ingénieur diplômé, in 1942, was carried out in the C.G.N.'s own yards at Ouchy.

The discarding of the beautiful knife-edged fiddle bows when the *Genève* and *Léman* were converted is regretted by many for visitors to Geneva can see what a yacht-like appearance such fine stems, together with the slanting bowsprits, lend to all the other vessels. It has been remarked that the only thing missing from such handsome bows is a figurehead. Yet, on reflection, Jean Calvin's visage would be too grim to match sparkling blue water and a cream bow wave; nor would a naked nymph square with the Reformation monuments on shore.

There must be many reasons, both sentimental and practical, why paddle steamers make their unfailing appeal. Associated mostly with holidays and fair weather, the wash and roar of the waters and the measured throb and thrust of the machinery exert a singular fascination. Especially is this so with the Paddlers of the C.G.N. whose machinery is wide open to the view of passengers. When one watches the magnificently kept machinery of these vessels, the last sentence of the inscription to Christopher Wren could well be repeated of Sulzer Frères' work: "If you require a monument look around you".

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