

# H. SPENCER LEWIS - RESTORER OF ROSICRUCIANISM

*Christian Rebisse, FRC*

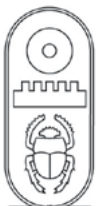


*H. Spencer Lewis, the co-founder of AMORC, at his desk, in a colorized image.*

Harvey Spencer Lewis was born on November 25, 1883, in Frenchtown, New Jersey. A few years later, his family moved to nearby New York City, where he was raised. His father, Aaron Lewis, was a farmer, college teacher, professional calligrapher, handwriting expert, and genealogist. His mother, Catherine, was a teacher. H. Spencer Lewis's family environment contributed much to the development of his mystical sensitivity. Not content with simply attending church on Sunday, the family read and also discussed the Bible at home. Until he was sixteen years old young Harvey participated enthusiastically in the activities of the Metropolitan Temple of New York City, also known as the Church of the Open Door. He loved to sing in the choir, and he listened attentively to the sermons of Dr. S. Parkes Cadman, the church pastor and a pioneering radio minister. He often spent his free time meditating in this church, and it was here that he had his first mystical

experiences. These experiences had such an impact on his soul that he was led to question himself about the profound nature of humanity and the possibility of establishing a dialogue between the soul and the higher worlds.

In 1900, H. Spencer Lewis completed his schooling and found employment in Baker and Taylor Publishing Company. This job allowed him to have at his disposal many books that helped satisfy his insatiable curiosity. Included among these were books about magnetism, a subject introduced to the United States in 1836 by Charles Poyan, a follower of Puységur. This was at a time when the United States—and New York City in particular—was passionately interested in the supernatural, magnetism, and spiritualism. Out of this infatuation arose both New Thought and the American Society for Psychical Research, two movements that would have a profound effect on the early years of Harvey Spencer Lewis.



## Psychic Researches

In contrast to the Theosophical Society, established in the United States in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, New Thought rejected pure occultism. It proposed instead a method of individual expansion oriented toward self-realization by means of concrete applications meant to resolve everyday problems. Research on undiscovered human faculties also interested the scientific establishment. In 1885 the renowned American psychologist William James established in Boston the American Society for Psychical Research, a branch of the organization located in London. In 1905, following the death of its director, Dr. Richard Hodgson, this psychic research society ceased its activities. However, within a few years, various other groups were formed, such as a special committee investigating fraudulent spiritualistic mediums, of which H. Spencer Lewis was a member from 1902. Although he was not yet twenty years old, H. Spencer Lewis was named president of this committee.

In March 1903, he married Mollie Goldsmith, and the following year they had a son, Ralph Maxwell Lewis. H. Spencer Lewis was at that time the arts editor of the *New York Herald* and presided over a committee created by the newspaper for investigating mediums. It was with the assistance of this daily that he created the New York Institute for Psychical Research—a group composed of scientists and physicians. Among members of the institute were such noted individuals as the writer and poetess Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919) and Dr. Isaac Kauffman Funk (1839-1912), best known for his work on psychic science, which included *The Widow's Mite and Other Psychic Phenomena* (1904) and *The Psychic Riddle* (1907).

Under the direction of Harvey Spencer Lewis, The New York Institute for Psychical Research conducted investigations examining the true abilities of mediums, which resulted in more than fifty fakes being unmasked. During this period Lewis published many articles concerning his researches in the *New York Herald* and in the *New York World*. One of the articles, entitled “Greatest Psychic Wonder of 1906,” published in January 1907 in the *New York Sunday World* with a portrait of the author, discussed the experiments conducted by the New York Institute for Psychical Research with a young Indian medium.

These researches left Lewis dissatisfied, as he found it difficult to believe that the phenomena produced through mediums were derived from the manifestation of spirits. Rather, he was persuaded that they originated in spiritual faculties yet unknown.



*Ella Wheeler Wilcox in 1915, in a colorized image.*

## The Meeting with Mrs. May Banks-Stacey

In 1907, Lewis abandoned psychic research, which he judged to be unproductive. What followed was a period of reflection. While engaged in his daily meditations, he became aware that he was finding the answers to questions touching upon the mysteries of life. Puzzled by this, he confided in May Banks-Stacey (1846-1919), an elderly woman he had met at the New York Institute for Psychical Research. This amazing individual, the widow of Colonel May Humphreys Stacey (1837-1886), was a member of the Theosophical Society and of the Theosophist Inner Circle, the esoteric group formed within the society. She took a keen interest in Asia and studied the teachings of Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902). She was also a member of the Manhattan Mystic Circle. May Banks-Stacey was attracted to all forms of occultism—especially astrology and chiromancy. H. Spencer Lewis related that it was while she was in Asia that she encountered Rosicrucians. It was from May Banks-Stacey that Lewis first heard about the Rosicrucians. Extremely interested, he then began to conduct research on this mysterious group.

At this time, he was only twenty-four years old and was employed as an illustrator at a New York newspaper. He also enjoyed some degree of success as a photojournalist. Along with these activities, he remained occupied with the Institute for Psychical Research and began to write some articles concerning psychic science and esotericism.

In February 1908, he contributed to *The Future*, a monthly publication belonging to the New Thought movement. Under the pseudonym of Prof. Lewis he wrote several articles on astrology and, using the name of Royle Thurston, he also published the first article of a series entitled “The New Ontology.” He described this work as being a series of lessons on a new science explaining life and death, as well as all spiritual phenomena. He touched upon such topics as vital life force, diet, health, magnetism, hypnosis, and psychic energies. But his collaboration with this publication was of short duration, because two months later he would have an experience that changed his life completely.

### A Mystical Experience

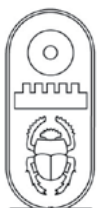
In the spring of 1908, on the Thursday after Easter, while seated in a pew to meditate, he had a mystical experience that would affect the rest of his life. During this experience, he came to understand that the knowledge he sought could not be found in books, but rather deep within himself. He was also convinced that he had to go to France so as to come in contact with Rosicrucians. This mystical experience left

a profound impression upon H. Spencer Lewis and became the starting point for his “Pilgrim’s Journey to the East.”

In the hope of obtaining some information regarding Rosicrucianism in France, he decided to write to a Parisian bookseller whose catalogue he had obtained. We have not succeeded in identifying this



*Mrs. May Banks-Stacey, co-founder of AMORC, in a colorized image.*





*Saint-Denis Gate in Paris, as seen on a postcard from 1908.*

individual. However, this person contacted H. Spencer Lewis with the following reply:

If you came to Paris and found it convenient to call at the Studio of M. —, the professor of languages at No. —, Blvd. St. Germain, he might be able to tell you something of the circle of which you inquire. It might be advisable to hand him this note. Certainly a letter to him announcing your coming (by date and name of boat) would be courteous.

### **The Journey to France**

Although his financial situation did not permit him to consider such a voyage, an unexpected opportunity presented itself the following week. His father, Aaron Lewis, an expert in authenticating documents as well as a renowned genealogist, needed an assistant while conducting research in France for the Rockefeller family. On July 24, 1909, the two men sailed for Europe on the *Amerika*, of the Hamburg Amerika

Line. On Sunday, August 1, the ship arrived at Cherbourg, and the two travelers set off for Paris by train. The days that followed were entirely devoted to genealogical research, and it was only in the following week that H. Spencer Lewis was able to visit the bookshop and the professor of languages on Boulevard Saint-Germain. “A Pilgrim’s Journey to the East” reported his meetings with the professor on Saturday, August 7, and on Monday, August 9. This man was about forty-five years old, spoke perfect English, and asked many probing questions to determine Lewis’s intentions. At the end of the second meeting, he recommended that his American visitor travel to southern France, where he would receive further instructions.

### **Toulouse, the Pink City**

Once again good fortune (or maybe more appropriately, Divine Providence) smiled upon our traveler, because his father had just planned to travel

to southern France where he could continue his genealogical research for the Rockefeller family. On Tuesday, August 10, the two men left Paris, and following some adventures that H. Spencer Lewis interpreted as his having been put to the test, they arrived in Toulouse on Wednesday. On the following day, his father resumed his work and probably went to Le Donjon (Keep or Old Tower) to consult the city archives. Meanwhile, H. Spencer Lewis went to the Salle des Illustres (Gallery of the Illustrious) of the Capitol, where he met an individual who was instrumental in bringing his quest to a successful conclusion. After a brief discussion, this person gave him a piece of paper on which was written the name of the street where he should go so as to meet some Rosicrucians.

H. Spencer Lewis does not disclose the name of this individual, but merely



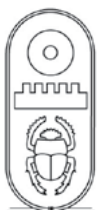
*H. Spencer Lewis was gazing upon this painting, The Appearance of Clemence Isaure to the Troubadours, in the Hall of the Illustrious when someone, probably Clovis Lassalle, gave him a piece of paper on which was written the name of the street where he should go so as to meet some Rosicrucians. Painting by Henri Martin, ca. 1898.*

indicates that his profession was photography. Later, Ralph M. Lewis, his son, indicated that this person was an eminent photographer. In all likelihood, he was Clovis Lassalle (1864-1937), a photographer who specialized in the fine arts, archeology, commerce, and industry. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that H. Spencer Lewis's personal archives contain a letter that Lassalle wrote to him on August 26, 1909.

Traveling by taxi to the address indicated by the photographer—since the trolley line did not go that far—Lewis rode out of the center of town, crossed the Garonne River, and went several kilometers before finding himself opposite a building that had an ancient tower similar to the one on the engraving that the Parisian professor had shown him a few days previously. After climbing the steps of a circular staircase, Lewis arrived at the top story, where he was greeted by an old man with a long gray beard and slightly wavy long white hair. The room he entered was a square chamber, its walls lined with books. The gentleman who received him was the archivist of a mysterious Rosicrucian Order, a group of initiates from Languedoc whose few members worked in the strictest secrecy. Lewis stated that his host was also a member of the same small group of Freemasons to which the Parisian bookseller belonged. After showing him the archives, the old man stated that he had been judged worthy of further knowledge and that he was to meet the Grand Master of the Order on the very same day.

### **The Initiation**

Around three o'clock in the afternoon, Lewis engaged another taxi and went to the address provided by the archivist. Once again he traveled away from Toulouse on a road that ran alongside a stream. After passing through the old town of Tolosa,



he arrived at a stone edifice encircled by high walls and situated on a hill. It was in this castle that, according to “A Pilgrim’s Journey to the East,” he was initiated into the Rosicrucian Order. Although this text does not give any details regarding this ceremony, his autobiography provides some intriguing information. We learn that the person who greeted Lewis was Count Raynaud E. de Bellcastle-Ligne, an elderly man, who lived here with his widowed daughter and whose means of living were modest, despite his noble origins. Speaking perfect English, he conducted Lewis to a drawing room where he questioned him about the psychic research he conducted in America, and showed great interest in his visitor’s previous mystical experiences.

At the end of the interview, Count de Bellcastle-Ligne informed our pilgrim that the moment had now come for him to be initiated and asked whether he felt ready to confront the “terror of the threshold.” He was then led to the second floor of the chateau where he was shown what

remained of an ancient Rosicrucian lodge. The count indicated that this temple had not been used for more than sixty years, although it had been visited by a few Freemasons on several occasions until 1890. His father had been the last presiding officer.

The conversation continued until the count stopped before an iron door to tell his visitor that he must now enter three chambers one after the other, “alone with God [the Divine] and his Master.” Carrying out the command, Lewis entered the first room, an antechamber. He then went into the second room, a darkened place where he underwent the “test of the threshold”; he then had a mystical experience where he sensed once again the presence of the invisible being who had manifested to him the previous year. He finally came to the third room where the count awaited. The latter explained to him that this room no longer had the decorations or furnishings it once had, and consequently he was forced to adapt the initiation ceremony.



*The chateau in Old Tolosa where H. Spencer Lewis was initiated. Drawing by H. Spencer Lewis, 1909.*

The count led him to different places in the chamber and communicated the secret meaning of this ritual.

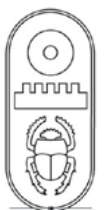
Now considering his visitor to be initiated, the old master led him into a little room. He recommended that the young man lie down, because he needed to rest in this room a few hours before meeting several other people. H. Spencer Lewis sat on a couch and dozed off. Upon awakening, he realized that he had slept for three hours. While asleep, he had dreamed the ceremony he was about to take part in. However, this time around, it was not the count who conducted him, but the “Master” whose presence he had perceived in the second chamber. After a short time, Bellcastle-Ligne introduced him to three elderly men whose forebears as well as themselves had been members of the Rosicrucian Order. At the end of this conversation, Lewis was led once more into the former lodge, where the count placed around his neck a cross adorned with a rose, thus signifying that he was now charged with the founding of the Order in America.

After this ceremony, one of the members present permitted Lewis to consult a collection in which the principles and major laws of the Order were represented. He was also allowed to copy the symbols and diagrams of the various Rosicrucian ceremonies. From a trunk placed in the middle of the room the count drew out some symbolic aprons, an altar cloth, and various archival documents so that the new initiate could take note of the symbols belonging to the different degrees of the Order. Afterwards the necessary information for the establishment of Rosicrucianism in America was communicated to him. The man directing the meeting at this point was not the count, but an individual named Lasalle, who acted as the master of ceremonies. Although the spelling of



*H. Spencer Lewis painting in nature, in a colorized image.*

his name differs slightly, might this not be Clovis Lassalle, the photographer Lewis had met the same morning in the Gallery of the Illustrious? We would be tempted to think otherwise, seeing that the latter described the master of ceremonies as being the author of numerous historical documents, whereas we know that this photographer wrote no books. However, it is possible that his statement alludes to innumerable photographic works concerning archeology and prehistory that were produced by Clovis Lassalle. Whatever the case, the master of ceremonies informed H. Spencer Lewis that he was now in possession of all the necessary instructions, but that other inner experiences were yet to come. He



concluded by requesting that no lodge be opened in America before 1915.

On August 13, 1909, the day after his acceptance into the Rosicrucian Order, Lewis wrote to his wife Mollie:

All my hopes on this trip have been realized, but not without many tests and trials. A pretty place, here. I have taken plenty of photos of the old fortress where I have participated in many strange ceremonies that I have never seen. At last I am in the R+C, thank God [the Divine] — but the oaths and vows are severe. How many in America will I find to keep them with me?

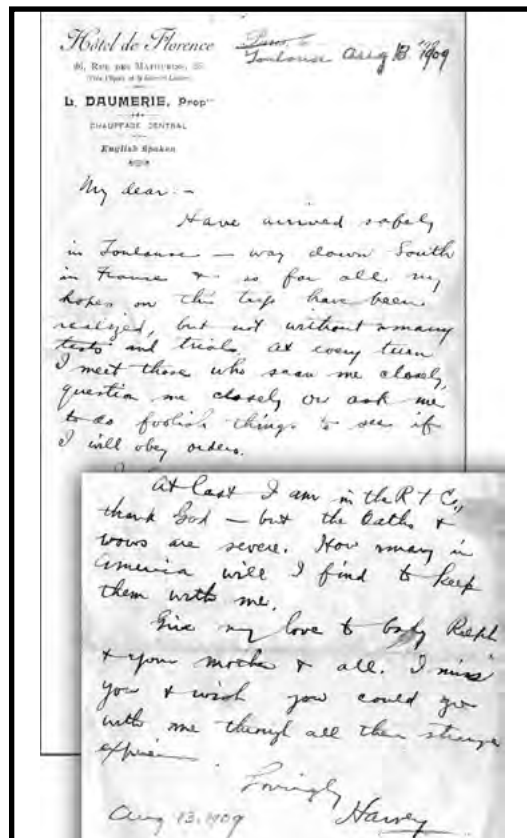
A few days later, on August 26, when he was about to return to Paris, Lewis received a letter from Clovis Lassalle. On the following Monday, Aaron Lewis and his son traveled by train to Paris. After a stop in London, where they visited the British Museum, they boarded the White Star, of the MS Adriatic Line, on Wednesday, September 1, and sailed for New York. For Harvey Spencer Lewis, it was the beginning of a great adventure.

### The Renewal of Rosicrucianism

For several years, H. Spencer Lewis prepared for the resurgence of the Rosicrucian Order in America. In May 1913, his wife Mollie died as a result of appendicitis. He was profoundly affected by her passing, which shattered his family life. In the same year, following circumstances that remain little known, H. Spencer Lewis began corresponding with Eugène Dupré, the secretary of the Essenian Temple, a Martinist lodge in Egypt. Before moving to Cairo, this Parisian Martinist had attended groups directed by Papus. In a letter dated July 23, 1913, Eugène Dupré sent to H. Spencer Lewis the rituals and initiation certificates necessary for the creation of a Martinist lodge in America. It seems that

the onset of the war of 1914-1918 put an end to this project.

In December 1913, Lewis confided to members of the New York Institute for Psychical Research his intention of establishing the Rosicrucian Order in America and he invited them to a meeting. However, more time was needed to see this project come to fruition. After a difficult period, Lewis began to see the hints of a new day. In the middle of 1914, he married Martha Morfier, a young woman whom he had met a few months previously. This understanding spouse accompanied him unobtrusively in his great project of restoring Rosicrucianism. Indeed, a few months later, events began to unfold, and a meeting held on Thursday, April 1, 1915, culminated in the official founding of the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC) in America. H. Spencer Lewis



Letter written by Harvey Spencer Lewis to his wife Mollie, on August 13, 1909, the day after his initiation.

was elected to head this order, which, under his direction, would experience a rapid development. In the following months other Lodges were established in Philadelphia, Boston, Wilmerding (Pennsylvania), Altoona, Rochester, Harlan (Iowa), and Detroit.

In January 1916, H. Spencer Lewis launched the *American Rosae Crucis*, a monthly magazine for Rosicrucians that was dedicated to science, philosophy, and religion. Until his death in 1939, he regularly wrote articles on Rosicrucian philosophy and mysticism for this magazine, which changed its name several times until it became the *Rosicrucian Digest* in 1929.

In 1926, H. Spencer Lewis, whose mind was endlessly bubbling over with ideas, began to engage in new activities. One of his projects was to set up a radio station that would broadcast special programming. He did not want this to be a source of propaganda for AMORC, but rather a tool dedicated to the arts, culture, and spirituality in general. In 1903, he had constructed a radio apparatus. In November 1913, he had obtained an operating license.

He was thus in possession of all the elements, allowing this experiment to be placed in the service of his ideal. The radio station was soon in operation, and in April 1927, *The Mystic Triangle*, AMORC's magazine made reference to the Order's broadcasting activities. Once again, H. Spencer Lewis gave proof of his creativity by introducing a new trend, in this instance by engaging the listeners by means of the telephone, and he would follow this with other innovations that would soon be copied by numerous radio stations.

### **AMORC's International Expansion**

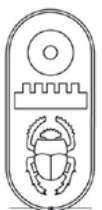
In November 1927, AMORC established its headquarters in San Jose, California. This was the beginning of activities at Rosicrucian Park, whose architecture was inspired by ancient Egypt.



*H. Spencer Lewis playing the cello, in a colorized image.*

Soon afterwards, in 1930, an Egyptian Museum was opened. Recognized by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and by the Egyptian National Museum of Cairo, it has welcomed millions of guests over the years and remains the largest Egyptian museum in Western North America.

At the beginning of the 1930s AMORC's development was such that H. Spencer Lewis had become the leader of a worldwide organization. He felt that it had become necessary to create an International Supreme Council, the World Council, composed of those individuals who directed the Order in the different parts of the world—France, Denmark, the Netherlands, Canada, Puerto Rico, Bolivia, Australia, Sweden, England, China, and Poland. Among these members, we may note the presence of the Russian painter



Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947), who had apparently become a member of the Order in 1929, the period in which he was proposed as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. H. Spencer Lewis related that he met Nicholas Roerich at the inauguration of the Roerich Museum in New York in October 1929. The two men were on such friendly terms that Nicholas Roerich was named AMORC's legate and was charged with carrying out certain missions for the Order. In 1934, during an expedition across China and Mongolia to find plants capable of combating the desertification of the American prairies, Roerich stopped at Harbin in order to meet his Rosicrucian compatriots. The local press related the Rosicrucian activities that he participated in during his stay in China.

#### **Writer, Lecturer, and Artist**

In 1929 H. Spencer Lewis published several books, including *Rosicrucian Questions and Answers*, which presented the Order through a series of questions and answers,

as well as its history; then he published *The Mystical Life of Jesus*, an essay on the mystical life of Christ, a subject he would return to in a later publication. Always preoccupied with adapting the traditional teachings to modern life, he also wrote *Self Mastery and Fate with the Cycles of Life*, an original work that proposed a method for understanding all matters, allowing people to regulate their lives by using the planetary and biological cycles that mark their existence.

Although endowed with a penetrating, ever-restless mind, Lewis did not lack a sense of humor, and during conversations he loved to slip in humorous maxims that set off volleys of laughter. This big-hearted man knew how to maintain an exemplary simplicity despite his important responsibilities. A musician from an early age, he skillfully played the cello and piano. He was also an excellent painter who created works whose themes were intimately associated with his centers of



*H. Spencer Lewis and his second wife, Martha, who was instrumental in the founding of AMORC, 1914.*

interest. Thus, one of the oldest pieces that has come down to us, *Arabian Nights* (1917), evokes the Middle East. Egypt was for him an inexhaustible source of inspiration, and many of his pictures were dedicated to this land, such as *The Love Idol*, or the inspiring *Entrance to Karnak Temple, Luxor*, which he painted on the spot during a trip in 1929. Esotericism was never absent from his canvases, as can be seen in *The Alchemist*, completed a few months before his death.

### Humanism and Fraternity

H. Spencer Lewis accorded special importance to the matter of fraternity and had a keen awareness of the equality of men and women, whatever their backgrounds may be. On numerous occasions he expressed himself on this point in his writings. In 1929, in *The Mastery of Life*, a booklet providing information concerning AMORC, he emphasized that racial superiority did not exist. In his book *Mansions of the Soul*, published in 1930, dealing with the origins of and the nature of the soul, he stated: “. . . it may be mentioned that this ancient understanding of the association of all egos with each other, and the uniting of all souls into one soul, . . . establishes the fact that all human beings are brothers and sisters under one creator and of the same essence, same vitality, and same consciousness, regardless of race, creed, color, or other distinctive elements of the ego.”

### An International Federation

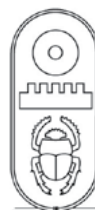
Although busy directing the activities of AMORC, H. Spencer Lewis continued to maintain relations with other individuals in the world of esotericism.

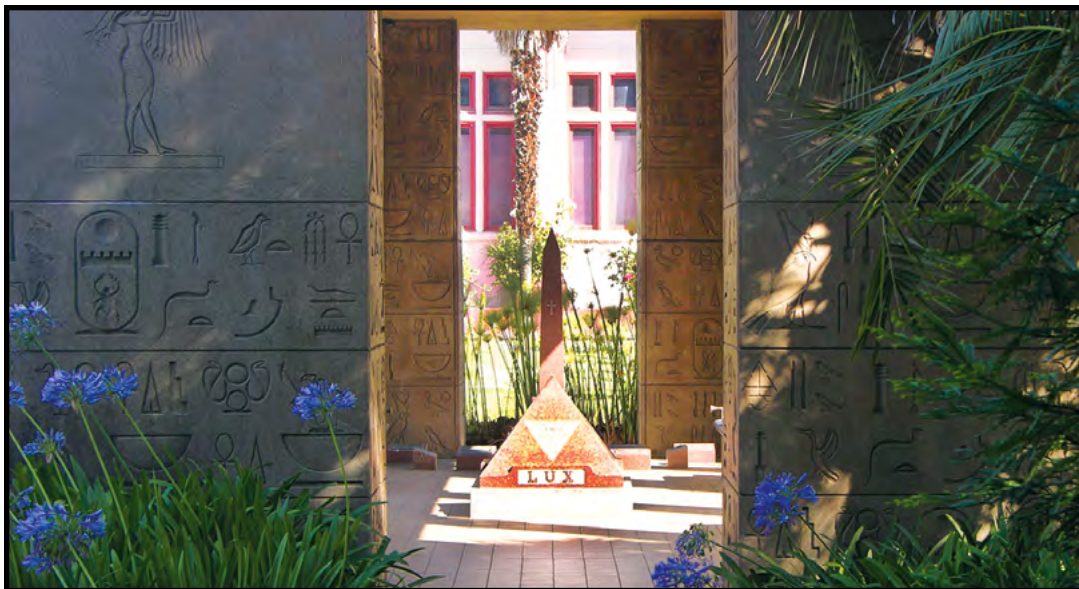
In the years preceding World War II great confusion reigned in the realm of esoteric organizations. Certain people were worried, particularly those who were part of the Rosicrucian movements created in Belgium by Émile Dantinne: the Order of the Rose-Croix Universitaire, founded in 1923, and the Ordre Hérmetiste Tétramégiste et Mystique (O.H.T.M.), instituted in 1927. Following the advice of Franz Wittemans, Jean Mallinger (1904-1982), a close associate of Émile Dantinne, wrote the following to H. Spencer Lewis on January 11, 1933: “We will be very honored to affiliate ourselves with the eminent Rosicrucian Order, of which you are the Chief and Guide . . . we will be very happy to be able to collaborate in AMORC’s activities. . . .”

H. Spencer Lewis welcomed the petition of the European Rosicrucians favorably. In August 1934 he traveled to Brussels so as to participate in the creation of the FUDOSI, a federation meant to bring together authentic initiatic orders. He became one of the three directors of this worldwide organization. He also used this occasion to renew ties with the Martinist Tradition. During this first congress of the FUDOSI, Victor Blanchard, director of the Ordre Martiniste et Synarchique, conferred on him the initiations and authority necessary



*H. Spencer Lewis in 1915, in a colorized image.*





*The pyramid burial marker of H. Spencer Lewis inside the Akhnaton Shrine in Rosicrucian Park.*

for the establishment of Martinism in the United States.

During his travels to Europe, H. Spencer Lewis had the opportunity to visit the planetarium at the Deutsches Museum in Munich. On his return to San Jose, he devoted all his energy to drawing up plans and creating the first planetarium projector put together by an American. In July 1936, the Moorish-style building constructed for housing this projector was inaugurated. This audacious creation was a testimony to the genius of the first Emperor of AMORC.

H. Spencer Lewis was a humanist and was a member of numerous philanthropic societies and associations. Despite his constant activities and numerous travels that he carried out in serving AMORC, he still found the time to devote himself to writing. In 1936, he published *The Symbolic Prophecy of the Great Pyramid*, a book that brought forth the mysterious knowledge of the Egyptians. In the following year, he published two more books. In the first, *The Secret Doctrines of Jesus* (1937), he returned to ideas that he had discussed in a previous work. In the second, *Mental Poisoning*, he

denounced the detrimental effects of negative suggestions and superstitious beliefs. He showed how the laws associated with the activities of the subconscious condition our life, and he proposed keys allowing us to not only liberate ourselves from all forms of mental poisoning, but also to use suggestion in a constructive way.

### **The Departure toward the Light**

Shortly after his return from his European travels, where he had participated in the FUDOSI congress that brought together Rosicrucian leaders from all around the world, H. Spencer Lewis's health went into a decline. Perhaps he had overtaxed himself while serving others for too many years and thus began to pay the price. As is true of all extraordinary individuals, he was naturally criticized and slandered, but he always worked with ardor and conviction in serving his ideal. He passed through transition on August 2, 1939, being only fifty-six years old. Thus disappeared the individual who, following a long quest, had attempted to give a fresh momentum to Rosicrucianism by way of the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis.