

# H. SPENCER LEWIS RESTORER OF ROSICRUCIANISM

*Christian Rebisse, FRC*

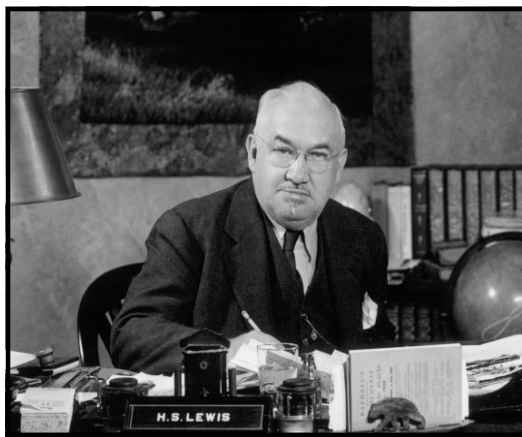
Harvey Spencer Lewis was born on November 25, 1883 in Frenchtown, New Jersey. A few years later, his family moved to nearby New York City where he was raised.

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. H. Spencer Lewis 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 March 1903, H. Spencer Lewis married Mollie Goldsmith, and the following year they had a son, Ralph Maxwell Lewis.

## **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 *A 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 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

## Toulouse

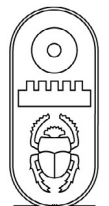
unexpected opportunity presented itself the following week. His father, Aaron Lewis, an expert in authenticating documents as well as a renowned genealogist, needed an assistant while conducting research in France for the Rockefeller family. On July 24, 1909, the two men sailed for Europe on the *Amerika*, 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.

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 the *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 indicates



1909 sketch by H. Spencer Lewis; the old tower of Toulouse and the chateau where his initiation took place.



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, 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.

Around three o'clock in the afternoon, Lewis engaged a taxi and went to the address provided. 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, a seventy-eight-year-old man who lived there 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 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 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, who acted as the master of ceremonies. Although the spelling of 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

for-tress where I have participated in many strange ceremonies that I have never seen ... At last I am in the R+C, thank God – 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.

To read H. Spencer Lewis's account of this inspiring experience, please see "A Pilgrim's Journey to the East," published in *The American Rosae Crucis magazine*, May 1916.

