

Summer 1928

## A Character Study and Life History of Violet Gibson Who Attempted the Life of Benito Mussolini, On the 7th of April 1926

Enrico Ferri

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Enrico Ferri, A Character Study and Life History of Violet Gibson Who Attempted the Life of Benito Mussolini, On the 7th of April 1926, 19 Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology 211 (1928-1929)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

A CHARACTER STUDY AND LIFE HISTORY OF  
VIOLET GIBSON WHO ATTEMPTED THE  
LIFE OF BENITO MUSSOLINI, ON  
THE 7th OF APRIL, 1926\*

---

ENRICO FERRI

---

(Defensive Memorial Presented to Military Law Court.)

The great sense of horror aroused by the attempt on Benito Mussolini's life by a woman of fifty, Violet Gibson, and the disastrous results which might have followed it, should not on any account, by concentrating our attention on the misdeed, prevent us from studying the author of the criminal attempt and considering what may be her legal liability.

Certainly, the idea of Miss Gibson's attempt may have been spontaneous to her abnormal mind. Crazy ideas due to auto-suggestion may have influenced her. Again the idea may have had its germ in the circle frequented by her in Rome or it may even have been started by the direct and personal influence of some criminal, who, with cruel ferocity, worthy of his vile nature, thought to avail himself of a mad woman as his agent.

All these hypotheses which are beyond our actual sphere of interest do not alter the legal status of Miss Gibson.

They could only alter her mental condition, for, had she been the blind instrument of some base criminal, our judgment of her moral attitude would be different.

Violet Gibson's position, however, in regard to the penal law by which she must be judged would be unaltered.

The question to be resolved is this:

At the time of the horrible attempt, was Violet Gibson in such a condition of mental infirmity as to be deprived of her moral consciousness or of her freedom of will to act? (Art. 46, C. P.).

The circumstances surrounding the deed, which was perpetrated in all its horrible contrast, on the glorious Piazza of the Capitol, show that Violet Gibson was "conscious" of her act.

The deed was not accomplished in an unconscious frenzy of delirium, terror, or hallucination.

---

\*Translated by Mary Flint Cassola.

On the other hand facts concerning Violet Gibson's former life were soon made known, such as her internment on former occasions in asylums in England, where she was found to be subjected to "homicidal ideas and to attacks of acute violent mania"; and her suicide, so stubbornly attempted in a convalescent home in Rome; and a preceding attempt at homicide, when she used a knife (an unusual weapon for criminal women) to try to kill a young girl.

Her idea on this last occasion was that of repeating the sacrifice of Abraham which was sufficient to convince anyone that they had to deal with an abnormal, unbalanced, and an infirm mind.

Moreover the psychological investigation of the case has been handed over to two illustrious men of science who are experts with asylum patients. Professors Sante De Sanctis and Augusto Giannelli have come to the conclusion, after a profound study of Violet Gibson from both a physical and psychical standpoint, that she, at the time of the attempt, was in a state of mental infirmity (i. e., non compos mentis) and was thus deprived not of her perception of right and wrong but of her freedom of will to act.

We have thus to deal with a case of "lucid insanity" or of "conscious madness." Insane criminals form the majority of the accused in such cases of crime, since crimes committed unconsciously or when there is loss of memory are the least frequent also when the criminal is insane. I have investigated and demonstrated, making use of many documents drawn up from the annual reports of the law courts, the psychology of the "homicidal" lunatic, and pointed out that a distinction should be made between lunatics who kill in a frenzy and on the impulse of the moment, and those who are led up to the act of killing by a slow invasion of the mind of the homicidal idea, and hence kill with "premeditation," "openly and in the presence of witnesses," with "calm after the attempt and at the time of arrest."

Further I have brought forward many cases in which the lunatic is aware of his insanity, but yields to an impulse or to a systemic attack of delirium, technically known as "paranoi."<sup>1</sup>

During the interviews with Violet Gibson which Onorevole Bruno Cassinelli, who is also her standing council, and I have had I have noted, and I have been accustomed to observe criminals, "insane and sane," for many years, that she is highly intelligent and cultured.

Now for anyone who has not a special knowledge and a prac-

---

<sup>1</sup>Ferri, *Homicide Considered in Criminal Psychology and Psychopathology*, II ediz., Torino, 1925, p. 259 to p. 420.

tical acquaintance with the science of psycho-pathology, Miss Gibson might at first give the impression of one with a normal intellect.

When, however, the inquiry delves below that superficial intellectuality reaching the zone of the "ego" in its greatest intimacy of sentiment, it is an easy matter to bring to light, certain shady and irregular regions of her mind. These she tends to dissimulate with all the tenacity so peculiar to paranoiacs. She shows a mania for secrecy which is very different from the usual Anglo-Saxon reserve. Miss Gibson is, as a matter of fact, an Irish woman; she turned Roman Catholic in 1902; she is not of pure Anglo-Saxon origin; she belongs to an aristocratic family; has a very fine education, and has been able to acquire that self-control which is such a marked characteristic of the Northern European nations.

Whence her absolute silence and diffident attitude assumed in reference to the nefarious attempt made in the Capitol Piazza, as also when cross examined at the judicial enquiry.

In spite of this reserve, as the experts and I ascertained, an occasional ray of light was thrown out, thanks to which we could gather that Miss Gibson was persuaded that she was symbolizing a sacred rite (this being due to her religious mania).

This idea though differing greatly in degree resembles that which possessed her when she attempted to murder the young girl referred to above, because she assumed her to be Isaac, and hence one destined to be offered as a blood sacrifice.

When, in one of my interviews I spoke to Miss Gibson of Benito Mussolini's character, her thoughts seemed engrossed as if dwelling on facts not previously considered. Her attention was even closer, when I talked of Benito Mussolini's former life, how he is a characteristic symbol of his land and of the people of Romagna, moulded above all in sentiment in all its types, from love of oratory to a passion for politics, from family affections to party solidarity and passion, from a practical sense to idealistic mysticism. So is Giuseppe Mazzini remembered there, as a sacred emblem of Italian civilization. The Romagnese are stalwart workers, indefatigable, methodical, quick to act on impulse, ever respectful, and at times a generous admirer of stronger opponents, when loyal and courageous.

Now when I noticed that her expression of frigidity or dislike for Benito Mussolini's achievements as head of the government was unaltered, I pointed out to Miss Gibson—besides the magnificent daily visible results of his ruling—what high motives prompt him,

and how all his being is concentrated in his patriotism, his mystic and heroic love of his country, Italy.

The country had been brought to the edge of a precipice in that deep chaos which ruled after the Great War. None of the political parties of the day showed any power to prevent the disaster threatening Italy.

Benito Mussolini is the man who saved his country from precipitating into the abyss awaiting her.

I then tried to touch Miss Gibson through her strong feeling for Catholicism. I referred to Mussolini's words in parliament, on the moral importance of the Roman Catholic Church; and to his subsequent political attitude to the Church.

This seemed to cause her to relax her diffident expression, but only for a moment. She did not, however, ask me any particulars on this subject and she remained quite passive, observing a sepulchral silence, when I gave her details of Benito Mussolini's untiring devotion to work, his daily life of unceasing activity, his sole aim to raise Italy to a high and sure destiny. Italy his dear country . . . as Ireland is hers. . . .

Once again Miss Gibson seemed touched by my allusions to Ireland and to its future destiny—for this is very anti-British. She soon, however, relapsed to her previous suspicious attitude towards everyone and everything. . . .

Since Miss Gibson's psychical characteristics are such, and have been observed independently of the technical investigation of the case it follows that the attempt made by her on the 7th of April is a link in the pathological chain of her different states of mind, from her being sent to an asylum to the aggression of a Carmelite monk; from the attempted homicide of a girl, in an attack of religious mania, to the determined attempt to commit suicide.

The judge could not do other than demand an exact account of Miss Gibson's psychology of the specialists in charge of her case; for it was obvious that she gave the impression of being abnormal and pathological.

The enquiry made has shown with great concision how two periods absolutely distinct from each other can be mapped out in Violet Gibson's life: the first is one of almost normal social life, although one of delicate health; the later period, on the other hand is one showing a moral unhinging, with attacks of delirium from time to time: it is one in which acts of violence such as attempts at homicide and suicide are prominent and in which she is evidently suffer-

ing from paranoia (i. e., chronic delusional insanity), with a religious mania as a background. Born in 1876, Violet Gibson had cases in her family history of alcoholism, tuberculosis, apoplexy, and perhaps insanity.

At five years of age she had scarlatina; at 14 years she suffered from peritonitis; at 16 from pleurisy; at 20 years she had rosolia; at 32 years within the space of 13 months she had 5 attacks of fever of unknown origin. At 38 years she underwent an operation for the removal of the left breast; at 39 years she was operated upon for appendicitis and a little later for chronic peritonitis.

In this period of her life, Miss Gibson had no wild ideas, neither did she do anything illicit or violent.

The second period starts when she was 38 or 39 years of age. The Great War had just begun, and she then became a Roman Catholic although she attended a mysterious kind of meetings on theosophy; she began to have a series of psychical disturbances of an acute nature; it is now that the series of violent acts are to be verified: the aggression on a monk at the Monastery of Kensington, attempted homicide of the girl in London, serious attempt at suicide, attempt on the life of Benito Mussolini, the wounding of a fellow prisoner in the Mantellate prison.

In consequence, the conclusion drawn from the enquiry is that she is neither solely "criminal" nor "mad" but is an "insane criminal." This means that whereas in the majority of cases, as I have pointed out in the case of the homicidal insane, insanity (when the intelligence is submerged) does not alter the fundamental (be it moral or immoral) character of the patient, but in some cases insanity either reveals or may originate criminal tendencies. Hence we must draw a line of distinction between the ordinarily insane who are more or less innocuous and those who show a suicidal mania (a submerging of the will to live) or show a tendency to criminality (submersion of the moral sense)—or again to both suicide and criminality as is evident in Miss Gibson's case. This last class of case shows most marked pathological changes both physically and mentally.

The above description of Miss Gibson's psychology leads us to two definite conclusions, which furnish very positive evidence for the penal courts to draw from.

I. That she on the occasion of the attempt of the 7th of April, was mentally infirm and acted consciously but was devoid of her free will power to act.

II. That she, however, must be considered as a dangerous subject and in consequence should be deprived of her personal liberty.

Miss Gibson herself is quite persuaded as to the correctness of the above deductions; for with the training she has been through on former occasions, when in the hand of the English law—she maintains that she is insane, and is in consequence irresponsible for her actions according to the law; she acknowledges on the other hand that she should be confined permanently in an asylum.

When I told her that in cases like hers, the English judge decides that the accused is "guilty but insane" and consigns him or her to an asylum for criminals at His Majesty the King's pleasure (i. e., for an absolutely unlimited period), Miss Gibson agreed that such a decision would meet her case perfectly.

This moreover is the decision reached after the judicial enquiry made in her case; it is upheld by us and we feel sure that it will be ruled duly in the courts of justice.

When, however, the case was about to be judged the Attorney General requested that the judicial decision on the accused's mental condition should follow open debate in the public courts in preference to a hearing with closed doors.

We feel confident that the court of justice will not grant this request, for—besides the manifold apparent reasons for which it is more than unwise to subject the accused when mentally infirm to the trial of an open debate in the public law courts—there is the fact that the doubts expressed by the illustrious Public Prosecutor have no foundation; with the exception of one item, which is that "the accused fired with premeditated and decided intent to kill." It may be that she intended to "spill blood" only, without any definite idea of killing. In any case, the Court of Cassation which formerly would not recognize the possibility of an infirm mind "even if totally infirm, being capable of premeditation," has already some years since changed its attitude and recognizes the noted truth that the insane, who are conscious of their acts—i. e., are not furiously maniacal—are often capable of a calculated premeditation of their crimes.

But, in spite of this established truth the Attorney General refuses to recognize the fundamental truths which the science of criminal psychiatry teaches us. . . .

The truth of the following has been established, viz., that the entire and clear consciousness of one's actions—even to the premeditation of the same—do not exclude the fact that such may originate

in an insane mind: in other words the insane person may act in full consciousness but without his normal free will.

On this account article 46 of the Penal Code establishes an alternative between consciousness and "freedom of will" and therefore it suffices that mental infirmity does away with one only of these states, for the accused to be considered not guilty.

For instance, the Attorney General attaches importance to her assertion that the stone she held in her hand at the time of her arrest was destined to "break the window of the Premier's car to enable her to aim better at him should he have been seated in the car."

It is enough to consider for a moment the circumstances in which this woman (fifty years of age and ill in health) was that day on the Piazza of the Capitol—how hemmed in she was by a crowd of functionaries and others to realize what a really crazy idea this was, for had she thrown the stone the subsequent firing of a revolver in the same direction would have been quite impossible.

And as for the so-called "revelations" made by Miss Gibson, they were denied later by her, yet this same Public Minister, whilst acknowledging that they are both most improbable and not standing investigation, does not come to the logical conclusion that they are a further proof or sign of loss of mental equilibrium in their author, for by these "revelations" she accused herself. In fact she subsequently during her cross-examination made a further pretence of revealing certain facts which were confuted with overbearing evidence and served only to demonstrate the "mythomania" of such a class of the insane.

The scarcity of exact data of Miss Gibson's private life previous to the attempt referred to by the Procurator General is no proof against her. There have been more than sufficient data brought forward in their essential outlines.

Her "watchful intelligence" and "shrewdness," her "dissimulation," her silence observed about the "secret" motive for the attempt, all simply mean that we are dealing with a case of "conscious insanity," and thus give extra proof of her mental state of paranoia. All the insane who suffer from paranoia have similar mental characteristics.

It is not rational moreover to make use of the same simple and easy verifications made in normal psychology in dealing with a case of criminal psychology.

In conclusion when he raises the question that Miss Gibson acting as she did, has shown a "strong and firm will-power" he con-

cludes—forthwith—that that does not show up her “wilful insanity” although he does not deny that her personality presents certain anomalies.

But, I must again draw attention to the fact that insane criminals, often have “a firm and strong” will power which, however, is invariably domineered over and brought to confusion by terrifying hallucinations (as in cases of furious and sudden mania in epileptics, alcoholics, etc.), or by fixed impulsive ideas (as in cases of chronic delusional insanity as is the case in paranoia). In other words Miss Gibson has a will power but it is a “sick will power.”

So much is this the case, that when in prison, before her cross-examination took place, Miss Gibson suddenly and impulsively struck a fellow prisoner with a little hammer (given to her for making artificial flowers). And as I write, I have been informed that Miss Gibson has been put under special observation by the prison authorities because she struck a fellow prisoner with a chamber and showed a renewed inclination to commit suicide.

With regard to this last fact it is well to observe that the Attorney General has said nothing about her serious attempt to commit suicide in a convalescent home in Rome, a long time before the attempt in question: she showed a tendency to suicide which is evidence in itself of an abnormal and morbid free will power.

And this is why, when faced by the unanimous conclusions of the government expert, and of the expert for the defence, which were come to after the government’s council’s request for a renewed psychological analysis of Miss Gibson, the Higher Court of Justice will surely accept our opinion and declare Miss Gibson not liable under the penal law, but representing a social danger, and in consequence not fit to be set free on society at large.

When, in April last, I, together with the Council for the government, the Public Prosecutor, the medical legal expert, was present at the proceedings of the case to verify that the wound received by Benito Mussolini was completely healed, I informed him that Miss Gibson’s family had asked me to take up her defence, and that I had agreed to be her Council, as I was certain that Violet Gibson was of insane mind. Benito Mussolini replied with benevolence: “I know it, and it is a good thing: thus Miss Gibson will be defended with all the serene calm that science can afford her.”

This state of mind, which is evidence of a noble attitude and which reflected the spiritual aspect of mind of both the Leader and of the Fascist Government itself in regard to Miss Gibson’s attempt,

has been a cue to the learned Magistrate who is investigating the case.

History and contemporary chronicles show us that a like attitude of calmness in similar cases of attempted homicide is very rare, especially when it concerns governments who have arisen after a revolution and are still passing through a more or less critical period of their political existence.

The sentence given by this most learned Court of Justice will surely afford another most noble example of unruffled calm as will also the military judges.

They will surely bring the results of expert evidence to bear on the winding up of this enquiry.

Italian Military law courts have always given proof of dealing with the personal characteristics of the accused in a sane and unbiased way. It is a noted fact, as observed from the first by the positivist school of criminology, that military judges—who have the estimable qualities of a jury without its inherent defects—were among the very first to give decided and unvarying importance to the mental condition of the accused, bearing in mind the conclusions reached by expert scientists.

They were also the first to estimate the amount of liability incurred by anyone who had acted for instance, under the impulse of a riotous crowd. Besides, when the proposed law on the “provisions for the defence of the State” was discussed in the Senate (20th November, 1926), the Premier reasserting his serene high-mindedness, speaking in regard to the special Law Court instituted by the above law, declared amidst “great applause” that “this law court will not be vindictive, but severely just.”

Thus every Italian will not only rejoice again at Benito Mussolini's escape from death when this painful judicial episode is revived; but he will also gather a splendid example, as given by the National Government and by the Italian Law Courts, of spiritual strength expressed, even in the case of such a terrible contingency, with serenity and noble sentiment of justice which stand as proof that Italy in her atmosphere of renewed life is enjoying a great progress in her civil evolution.