

Wamas hls

# The madam and the 'unusual Bantu'



THE MADAM . . . Somerset West businesswoman Gail van Litsenborgh.

## Chris Whitfield

LAST month Somerset West businesswoman Gail van Litsenborgh, disillusioned with a string of domestic servants, placed a newspaper advertisement asking for "that unusual Bantu . . . who is not a thief and a liar".

This week she found herself in another row after her most recent house helper, Abigail Mtyali, had returned from taking her daughter to the doctor to find her belongings chucked out of the house and soaked by pouring rain.

Mrs Mtyali said she had taken her daughter, Rose (21), to the doctor because she was extremely ill. Rose didn't know many people in the town where she had lived for only two months and her employees were on holiday and couldn't help her, said Mrs Mtyali.

Estate agent Mrs van Litsenborgh said it was part of her domestic servant's task to look after her children, aged 10 and 12, and not leave them unattended when she was at work. She felt Rose was adult enough to be able to take herself to the doctor.

Mrs van Litsenborgh caused something of a storm in the town when she placed the ad asking: "Is there just one honest, experienced, hard-working Bantu maid who cooks, cleans, is able to run a household, who is not a thief and liar and who has a reference letter? If you are that unusual Bantu telephone . . ."

She later told The Sunday Star she had been in a temper when she placed the ad and regretted it. She explained that she had had some

## 'I was in a temper,' she says

unfortunate experiences with domestic employees who had stolen from her and "you can take so much and then you have had enough".

Mrs Mtyali had not heard about the ad. A friend told her Mrs van Litsenborgh was looking for an employee and she took the job. She was paid R150 month for cooking, cleaning the house and looking after the boys. She lived in a room in the house.

Local Domestic Workers Union (DWU) organiser Nora Juries said the salary was reasonable, at the basic wage the union were asking for new employees.

Mrs Mtyali said she had found Mrs van Litsenborgh a difficult employee.

Her daughter had come to her two weekends ago and said she was feeling extremely ill. She had flu and headaches and was vomiting.

She decided to take her to the doctor on Monday after working for the morning "because there is always a lot of work after the weekend".

She said she phoned at 12.30 pm and Mrs van Litsenborgh refused to give her permission to take her daughter to the doctor.

"She said she was not interested in my children and I was there to look after her children. She said my daughter was a woman and

could take herself to the doctor."

Mrs Mtyali said her daughter was not familiar with Somerset West and did not know the doctors. She felt she must accompany her to the doctor and so "I just went".

She returned at 7.30 pm that evening after having walked some distance from the Van Litsenborgh home to town and back. She found her clothes and suitcases had been thrown out and were lying soaked in the rain.

Mrs van Litsenborgh claimed she had been phoned by her 10-year-old son who had said Mrs Mtyali was leaving him and his 12-year-old brother at home "to take her daughter to see a doctor during a working day".

"I asked him to call her to the phone and told her part of her job responsibility was never to leave my children alone and she could not take her adult daughter to the doctor — she was quite capable of taking herself there.

"I was still busy explaining when she slammed the phone down on me, saying that her children were more important than mine."

She phoned back and found Mrs Mtyali had left, so she went and fetched her children and removed all Mrs Mtyali's possessions and placed them in the walled-in courtyard at the side of the house.

She had paid her in full in spite of the conditions of employment and felt she had more than fulfilled her obligations. She denied she had sworn at or used abusive language when Mrs Mtyali had come around with police in the evening.

"And I told her if I ever saw her near my office or house again I would call the police," said Mrs van Litsenborgh.



THE DOMESTIC SERVANT . . . Mrs Abigail Mtyali.