

Friend mourns loss

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MALACCA: Tears welling in his eyes, Datuk Tan Cheng Swee said he was hoping for a miracle for his best friend to recover.

But it was not to be.

The last time he saw Tun Ghafar Baba in a conscious state was about three weeks ago at the hospital where he was warded.

Ghafar had smiled weakly, held his hand tightly and called out his name several times.

"He was a tough man," said Tan, 85, fondly recalling his friend of 50 years.

Dressed in a white shirt and a black tie, the Malacca MCA adviser was rushing to go to Kuala Lumpur to attend Ghafar's burial at the National Mosque's Heroes Mausoleum.

As he hurriedly talked to

reporters at his home in Jalan Bukit Cina here yesterday, Tan looked disturbed and shocked.

"I am sad to hear of his passing and I will dearly miss him," said Tan, who had known Ghafar since 1955, when the Umno stalwart was heading the party in Malacca.

Ghafar was contesting the Melaka Luar state seat in an election of the Federal Legislative Council and Tan was the election committee secretary.

Their friendship blossomed. They used to tell people that they were like brothers.

They were indeed brothers-in-arms, especially when Ghafar became Chief Minister of Malacca and Tan, the MCA state chairman then, a state executive councillor.

Tan described Ghafar as a simple, humble and tough yet impatient man.

Both men also shared many secrets but Tan was only willing to relate one and that concerned Singapore's breakaway from Malaysia in 1965.

The two were in a train heading for Singapore.

"He told me that he was sent by Tunku Abdul Rahman (the Prime Minister then) to talk to Malay supporters as Singapore was withdrawing from the federation."

Tan said an official announcement had yet to be made on Singapore's secession then.

"Ghafar must have trusted me a lot," he added.

In another interview with *The Star*, Tan said the only secret

that Ghafar had not shared with him was when he planned to take Heryati Abdul Rahim as his second wife in 1993.

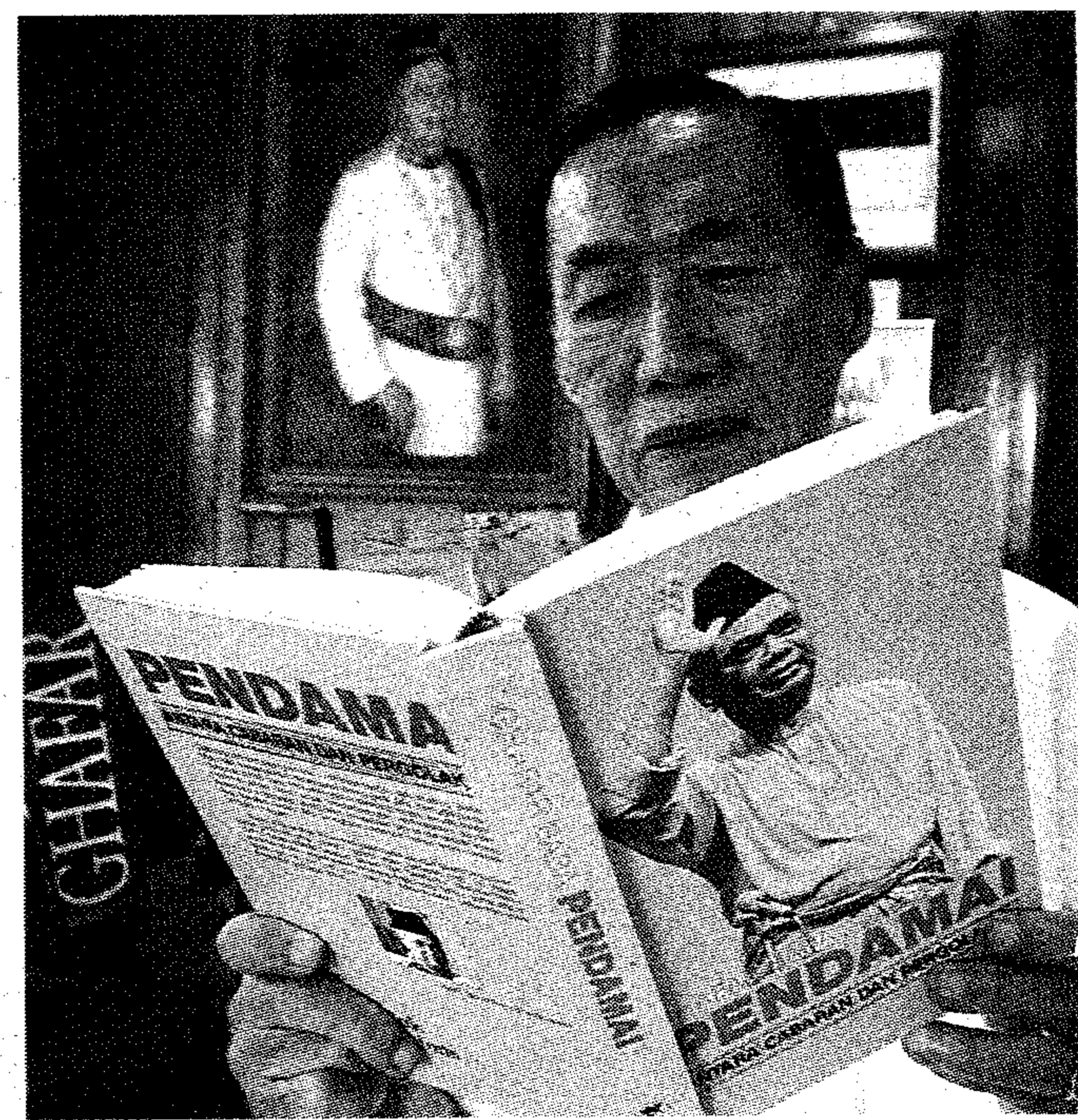
"I would have objected. Maybe that's why he didn't tell me."

The thing Tan appreciated most about Ghafar was how he remembered his friends and bore no grudges.

"He always looked serious but he liked to listen to our jokes."

When Ghafar was ill and the family was preparing for the worst, Tan said he received a "family member" car sticker that allowed him to visit the Ghafar household without any hassle.

"I was mentally prepared to accept the bad news," he said but his teary eyes betrayed him.



CHERISHED MEMORIES: Tan taking a look at a book on Ghafar at the Tun Ghafar Baba Gallery in Malacca yesterday. Tan and Ghafar had been friends for 50 years.