CHAPTER VIII.

AL-MUHALLAB HELPS MUṢʿAB’S EXPEDITION AGAINST AL-MUKHTĀR.

Year 67 A.H.

Towards the end of the year 66, al-Kūfa was in the throes of a violent upheaval. Al-Mukhtār, who had installed himself firmly in the town, pretended to be the Avenger of al-Ḥusain and the champion of the cause of the downtrodden 'mawālī.' Such a move naturally caused a great deal of offence to the noble party who resented very keenly the loss of their privileged position and the encroachment by the 'mawālī' upon what they considered their natural and legitimate rights. Matters came to a head when the armies of al-Mukhtār left al-Kūfa in order to oppose 'Ubaidullāh b. Ziyād who had attacked al-Mauṣil and was trying to advance to al-‘Irāq from that direction. The aggrieved noble party thought that a golden opportunity was afforded them of ridding themselves of al-Mukhtār and thus reasserting their former position and influence. They rose in an armed rebellion which, however, was crushed with an iron hand by al-Mukhtār. This unsuccessful insurrection generally known as the incident of Jabbānāt al-Sabī had very tragic consequences for the nobles. Besides heavy losses during the course of the battle, al-Mukhtār subjected to wanton massacre all those who had fought against al-Ḥusain at Karbalā. Such cruel and revengeful persecution caused
in the estimation of the high authorities.

Muṣʿab wrote to al-Muhallab:

"No doubt, you are the greatest man of al-‘Irāq and the chief of the Yamanites. Through you, ‘Allāh has warded off the enemy and protected the homesteads. The ‘ilokhtar (i.e. al-Mukhtar) has raised his head in al-Kīfa and we have deferred all decisions concerning him pending your arrival. It is your view that will be adopted and your word that must prevail. So, do come in the name of ‘Allāh and appoint al-Mughīra b. al-Muhallab as your successor with instructions that he should consult you by correspondence on all such matters as he is not able to decide for himself."(1)

Al-Muhallab read the letter and then, turning to Muhammad, expressed his surprise that Muṣʿab could find no other man to act as his messenger than him. Muhammad replied that he was no messenger. Rather it was the distressing plight of their (the Kīfan nobles’) women and children who had passed under their slaves and clients that had brought him thither. Al-Muhallab now yielded to the persistent appeal and handed over the command to al-Mughīra. Addressing his people on the occasion, he assured them that al-Mughīra would behave with his youngers kindly and affectionately like a father, with his elders obediently

(1). Raghba 8/35.
and dutifully like a son and with his equals sincerely and sympathetically like a brother. Further he impressed upon them the competence and wisdom of al-Mughira saying, "I did not wish for any right thing but al-Mughira preceded me to it." In return he appealed to them to show obedience to him and to deal gently with him.

Muṣḥab also wrote to al-Mughira formally appointing him as successor to his father and hoping that he would prove equal to the task and would act earnestly and resolutely (1).

Al-Muhallab started for al-Baṣra with a large force and an immense amount of wealth. His magnificence and grandeur were such as no other Basran could boast of. On reaching al-Baṣra he went to see Muṣḥab whose chamberlain, unacquainted with his identity as he was, checked him. This offended al-Muhallab's sense of dignity so much that he struck the chamberlain on the nose. The chamberlain went to his master with his nose bleeding and said to him that a person whom he knew not, had beaten him. Soon al-Muhallab appeared before him and on seeing him Muṣḥab forthwith bade the smitten chamberlain go away. Such was the privileged position that al-Muhallab had attained.

1. THE BATTLE AT AL-MADHĀR.

Having secured al-Muhallab's active help and cooperation, Muṣḥab had no hesitation to embark upon the expedition. At once he ordered a rally at the Great Bridge (al-Jisru 'l-'Akbar) and thence he started on his march (1). Anon. 111.
upon al-Kufa. Al-Mukhtar sent a huge army under 'Abdmar b. Shumait to meet Mus'ab. The two armies met at al-Madh'ar, the capital town of Maisan situated between al-Bagha and Wasi. Al-Muhallab commanded the left wing of Mus'ab's army while the right wing was commanded by 'Umar b. 'Abdullah b. Ma'mar. As the zero hour struck, 'Abbâd b. al-Husain who headed the cavalry of Mus'ab, initiated an attack on Ibn Shumait. But the attack failed to produce any tangible result and 'Abbâd retired.

It was now al-Muhallab's turn to attack the right wing of the Kufan army which was commanded by 'Abdullah b. Kamil al-Shakiri. Al-Muhallab's attack proved effective and irresistible. The enemy wing was thrown into disorder and Ibn Kamil had to alight from his horse. Al-Muhallab, however, withdrew for a short while during which both the contending wings kept to their respective positions. Al-Muhallab had now tested the might of his adversary and he commended to the notice of his soldiers that the enemy had already betrayed his weakness by his disorderly behaviour. Soon he launched another fierce attack with the result that the general body of Ibn Kamil's soldiery turned tail. Ibn Kamil himself, along with a number of Hamdânites, persevered but even they could not withstand the terrible onslaught for long and were ultimately routed.

At the same time 'Umar b. 'Abdullah also attacked and successfully repelled the left wing of the Kufan army and then followed a general attack on Ibn Shumait.
As the Kūfān troops were on the verge of defeat they called out to their comrades of Bajīla and Khath'am to be steady. This evoked from al-Muhallab a subtle counter-appeal to take to heels so as to spare themselves the loss of their precious lives for the sake of the 'slaves' i.e., the 'mawālī' who under the leadership of al-Mukhtar aspired to deprive the nobles of their privileged position. Very soon Ibn Shumayt was killed and his entire army was annihilated.

2. THE BATTLE AT HARŪRA.

From al-Madhār Muḥṣab advanced towards al-Kūfa. Al-Mukhtar, however, determined to intercept him on the way. Therefore, he himself came down with a large army and engaged Muḥṣab at Harūra. The disposition of Muḥṣab's army was such that al-Muhallab commanded the right wing which consisted of al-'Aẓd and the Tamām while 'Umar b. 'Ubadullāh commanded the left wing which comprised of Bakr b. Wā'il and 'Abd al-Qais. The Kūfāns began with a vigorous attack on the left wing. The Bakr and the 'Abd al-Qais fought hard and tenaciously and bore the attack well. But Muḥṣab was anxious that al-Muhallab should create a diversion by attacking the enemy on his own front. Accordingly he sent a word to al-Muhallab exhorting him not to be a passive spectator of the miserable lot of the two 'fifths' (i.e., the Bakr and the 'Abd al-Qais) and to rush upon the enemy forthwith. Al-Muhallab, however, thought differently. He was not the man who would submit tamely to the advice of Muḥṣab unless it coincided with
his own judgement. He sent back the reply that he was not prepared to have the 'Azd and the Tamīm cut to pieces because of the dread of the Kūfans and that he would not move unless he thought a favourable opportunity presented itself to him.

Muṣḥab, however, was not satisfied with al-Muhallab's reply. The latter had two large and compact divisions of al-'Azd and the Tamīm under him and Muṣḥab could not understand why such an effective force should remain inactive while the left wing was almost weighed down with the brunt of the attack. He again urged upon al-Muhallab not to wait any longer.

Before long, al-Muhallab did open the attack saying to his soldiers, "Others have been fighting all the day while we remained inactive. They have fought well and it is now our turn to do our duty." Al-Muhallab manoeuvred the attack with his characteristic thoroughness and it fell so heavily upon the other party that it was impossible for it to outlive it. Within a short time, the Kūfan army was utterly defeated and al-Mukhtār fled back to al-Kūfa.

The words addressed by al-Muhallab to his soldiers just before opening his long-awaited attack are a conclusive proof that it was no facile complacency that prevented him from complying with Muṣḥab's advice. Al-Muhallab was fully conscious of his duty and was prepared to do it conscientiously at the right moment. But at the same time he also knew the expediency of the hour. It was in the interests of military strategy alone that he held back from delivering his crushing blow earlier. Most probably he wanted to hold his own strength in reserve to be used
only when the enemy was sufficiently weakened by his own rash tactics. Surely, he must have known the 'great precept' that "in a cavalry combat the side which holds back the last reserve must win." It is also remarkable that this last reserve was thrown in on the flank rather than on the front of the enemy which is perfectly in accord with principles of military science (1).

3. THE BLOCKADE OF THE FORT OF AL-MUKHTAR.

Both al-Muhallab and Muṣʿab were well pleased with their triumph at Ḥarūrā. Only, the unhappy loss of Muḥammad b. al-ʿAbd al-Shāṭir on the last day of the battle affected them very deeply. Their next step was a direct march upon al-Kūfa whither al-Mukhtar had already retired.

Al-Mukhtar had long ago fortified his citadel at al-Kūfa and made full preparations for a possible siege by Muṣʿab. So, fleeing back to al-Kūfa he at once entrenched himself along with his supporters in the fortified citadel. Soon he was followed by al-Muhallab and Muṣʿab who blockaded all supplies to him. Yet the blockade was often run through by women sympathisers who employed a clever ruse for the purpose. They hid provisions and foodstuffs under their ample coverings and started from their homes ostensibly for the Great Mosque or the residence of some relation of

(1). Hist. of the Art of warfare (p. 211) by Prof. Oman.
theirs. But as they reached near the citadel the gates were opened to them and they slipped stealthily into it.

Certainly, Muṣʿab could not for a moment allow the continuance of these loopholes. Al-Muhallab, who knew best how to deal with such problems, advised him to order that the by-streets be blocked so that the besieged army be cut off from all communication with its sympathisers outside. As a further measure to tighten the blockade Muṣʿab ordered his men to move forward and occupy points nearer the beleagured fort. Accordingly, ʿAbbād b. al-Ḥusayn advanced to near the mosque of Juhaina while al-Muhallab established himself at Chihār Sūj Khunais (1).

Soon the besieged army began to feel the rigour of the blockade. Scarcity of provisions became acute and discontent grew. Ultimately (2) al-Mukhtar gave way but determined to go down fighting. So, he in company of only nineteen of his soldiers, made a sortie upon the besieging army and was killed (15th Ramadān, 67). The next morning the garrison surrendered and thus Muṣʿab's campaign came to a successful end.

Events fully justified Muṣʿab's firm belief in the indispensability of al-Muhallab's assistance for the achievement of success. Apart from his valuable contribution in men and money, which he brought with him from Fārs,

(1). Must have been the name of a quarter in the city of al-Kūfā just as a quarter in al-Baṣra was called Chahār Sūj Bajla (Yaq. 3/339).

(2). According to al-Ṭahāqī the siege lasted four months. (Tab. 2/749).
al-Muhallab contributed a great deal in generalship and direction of strategy. Both at al-Madhār and Harūrā', the final blow came invariably from al-Muhallab's wing. Then again at al-Kūfa it was al-Muhallab who took an active part in devising ways and means of tightening the blockade of the fort of al-Mukhtar. Al-Muhallab more than fulfilled the best hopes of his friends and admirers and we may safely assert that, but for al-Muhallab's help, Mus'ab's success would have been very doubtful if not impossible.

References:

Anon. 111.
Kam. 643.
Tab. 2/718 seq.