CHAPTER XVIII.

CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE ’AZĀRIQA.

Fourth Period (Continued).

Second Phase: Offensive at Kāzarūn.

Within a month or so of al-Ḥajjāj’s arrival everything was ready for a full-blooded offensive against the ’Azāriqa. By express orders of the new governor, al-Muhallab and Ḥbn Mīkhnaf initiated a concerted drive on Monday, the 20th Shaʿbān, 75 A.H. with the result that the enemy retired from RamaHurmuz without a serious military engagement(1). Qatari then thought of entrenching himself and his army in the inaccessible lofty mountains of Sardan or Saradān on the Khuzistān-Fārs border, but on the advice of his lieutenant ʿAbīda b. Hilal, moved into Sābūr and encamped at Kāzarūn. Al-Muhallab advanced in his pursuit to Ḥarrajān and thence to Sardān where he hoped the retreating enemy was most likely to seek shelter. But finding that Qatari was not there, he continued his march forward till he arrived at Kāzarūn in the beginning of the month of Ramādān(2).

Both the hostile armies now lay in close proximity to each other in Kāzarūn and a major clash was in all probability quite imminent. Before the battle could start, however, al-Muhallab received a letter from al-Ḥajjāj

(1). Tab. 2/875.
(2). Tab. 2/875,11; Kam. 667.
admonishing him for having turned to tax-collecting to the deliberate neglect of military operations. In the letter al-Hajjāj also thought it fit to taunt al-Muhallab with his descent from al-ʿAwd and his domicile in Ḫumān, both of which were generally held in low esteem, and to tell him that he had been allowed to continue in the command despite the presence of ʿAbdullāh b. Ḥakīm al-Majāshi and ʿAbbād b. al-Ḥusain al-Ḥabāṭī whose claims deserved recognition. The letter concluded with an explicit threat that if al-Muhallab failed to launch active operations against the enemy at a given time and place then al-Hajjāj would 'aim the point of spear at him.'(1)

This was the first of a series of letters bearing on the same subject but couched in different tones, sometimes mild and persuasive and at other times harsh and threatening, that al-Hajjāj sent to al-Muhallab at intervals during the future course of the campaign. Obviously these letters were prompted by a vague misgiving lest al-Muhallab should attempt to procrastinate with the Ṭzarīqa in order to maintain himself in an advantageous position. The misgiving was but the direct consequence of al-Hajjāj's failure to understand and appreciate the true implications of al-Muhallab's pioneer method of warfare. As a matter of fact, al-Muhallab was alone in realising that the Ṭzarīqa presented an

(1) For Arabic text see Appendix p. 179.
entirely new problem and that it was quite impossible to exterminate them by a mere succession of fierce battles. Hence he always planned and prepared for a protracted war of manoeuvring designed to exhaust the nerves and the resources of the enemy with occasional hard knocks aimed at particularly weak points and delivered at carefully chosen and opportune moments. Al-Hajjāj, on the other hand, totally failed to rise above the common level of the military generals of the time who could conceive of war only in terms of desperate head-on clashes. Thus all considerations of time, place and strategy being quite unintelligible to him, he could not but suspect the motives behind a protracted war.

Nevertheless it must be admitted that the circumstances of al-Muhallab were indeed such as to tempt a dishonest and less scrupulous man to seek personal ends at the expense of the interests of the state. ‘Abdur Rahman b. Sa‘īd did actually suggest such a selfish course to him. Further, his particular care to collect taxes, which was necessary with a view to provide for the heavy financial outlay on maintenance and equipment and was also justified by considerations of consolidating the gains, was enough to lend colour to the suspicion about his selfish motives. It was therefore quite natural rather even wise and prudent on the part of a vigilant master like al-Hajjāj to see that a military chief should not be tempted to take unfair advantage of his exceptionally high and unrivalled position. But the tone and
the wordings of this first letter were highly offensive and taunting and, as such, constituted a grave deliberate affront to the honour and prestige of a prominent personality that al-Muhallab was. It was really indiscreet on the part of al-Ḥajjāj to attempt to cow al-Muhallab by the same bullying tactics that he had adopted with the common people as well as lesser nobles and petty officials. The tone, though not the subject, of this letter was as much a blunder as the previous letter recognising the merits of al-Muhallab was a stroke of administrative wisdom. Al-Muhallab was obviously hurt by it and even though his sons commended moderation to him, he could not, without compromising his self-respect, help replying to every point in the same coin. He wrote back to al-Ḥajjāj that 'a man who was unable to collect the tax would prove still more incompetent to fight the enemy' and that the two generals named by him, if appointed to the command, would have surely deserved it by virtue of their skill and experience in war. It is remarkable that al-Muhallab had nothing derogatory to say about his rivals. Such generous and dignified attitude is quite characteristic of a man so confident of his own greatness as to disdain to try to establish it by indulging in slighting the merits of others. Answering the taunt of al-Ḥajjāj, al-Muhallab said that 'worse than al-‘Azd' was the tribe whose genealogy remained a matter of dispute and was traced to three different origins, this being a reference to al-Ḥajjāj’s own tribe of Thaqif whose origin

(1) Kam. 668,15.
was variously ascribed to Qais b. 'Ailān, Rabī‘ab, Hizār and the tribe of Thamūd (1). Lastly, as for the threat hurled at him, he retorted that if al-Ḥajjāj aimed the point of spear at him he would on his part ‘turn the outer side of the shield towards him’ i.e. would change his present friendly attitude towards him.

It must be noted that only a man with a clear conscience could venture to write such a bold and categorical reply even returning personal slights in the same coin. This was typically the reply of one who was not at all eager to keep himself in a position which could not by common consent be worthily filled by any one else. Al-Muhallab was always ready for service whenever it was offered to him but, in the words of ‘Abū ʿIshaq al-Sabī‘ī(2), he never showed an anxiety to secure any position for himself. It was the strength of this unique position that made even the blustering al-Ḥajjāj swallow up the retort with regard to the doubtful origin of his tribe and to put up with al-Muhallab’s clear refusal to follow the directions from above against his own judgment.

As soon as al-Muhallab and Ibn Mikhnaf alighted at Kāzarūn where qaṭārī was already encamped, preparations were afoot in both the opposite camps for an imminent battle. Al-Muhallab’s first care was to fortify himself with a

(1). Raghiba 8/77; see also Ency. 4/734.
(2). Isa. 3/535.
ditch. He also sent a word to his comrade Ibn Mikhnaf whose army was encamped separately at Kāzar (which place must have stood not very far from Kāzarūn), to do likewise. But Ibn Mikhnaf, like ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz and ʿUmar b. ʿUbaidullāh, had no prudence to complement his bravery. His reply was, "Our ditches are our swords." Al-Muhallab again urged that a ditch was necessary as a protection against night-attack. This time Ibn Mikhnaf's son, Jaʿfar, who would not lag behind his father in disastrous over-confidence, sent the arrogant reply, that they bothered as little about a night-attack as 'the breaking of wind by a camel'. Al-Muhallab did not insist any further but he could clearly see the disaster that was to overtake the auxiliary Kufan contingent. Turning to his son al-Muqṭira he remarked that the Kūfan had failed to take the safe side and had taken up an entirely wrong attitude. (1)

On Wednesday, the 21st Ramaḍān, 75 1.H., the two armies met and the battle was at its peak soon after midday. (2) Al-Muhallab requisitioned succour from Ibn Mikhnaf who sent a reinforcement under the command of his own son Jaʿfar. The Kūfan warriors, wearing new white robes, took a very prominent part in the battle and proved to be the weight that tipped the scales in favour of al-Muhallab although he and his sons equally distinguished themselves by their prowess. Al-Muhallab had the upper hand of his

(1). Tab. 2/875 ; Kam. 667.
(2). Tab. 2/876, 3-5.
(3). Kam. 668; cf. Tab. 2/876, 5 seq.
enemy when the latter retired from the field after suffering heavy losses of killed and injured.

Towards the end of the day’s battle Ṣāliḥ b. Mikhraq, the Azraqite lieutenant, was observed organizing a picked corps of about four hundred distinguished knights from his army. Al-Muhallab could at once guess the purpose behind this move and remarked to al-Mughira that it could be no other than a night-attack. He also knew the vulnerable point of his camp. When the Azariqa has retired for the day he dispatched al-Mughira to supervise the defence of the quarter of Banū Tamīm. The Tamīmite chief, al-Ḥarīsh b. Hilāl, however, sent al-Mughira back with the assurance that the Emir should not worry on their account (1).

At mid-night al-Muhallab’s warning to Banū Tamīm and his apprehensions about Ḥabn Mikhnaf came out to be painfully true. Ṣāliḥ b. Mikhraq at the head of the same 400 soldiers, first launched a night-attack on the Banū Tamīm but, finding them on their guard, was compelled to retreat. It then occurred to the attackers that Ḥabn Mikhnaf offered an easy target because he was unfortified by a ditch and his ranks were depleted of the soldiers who had exhausted themselves on the side of al-Muhallab during the day. They also recalled the arrogant boast of the Mifans that the Azraqites mattered as little to them as the 'breaking of wind by a camel.' So they at once turned to the camp of Ḥabn Mikhnaf at Kāzar which they stormed by surprise. Ḥabn Mikhnaf was caught

(1). Kam. 668, 3-5; 669.
completely unawares so much so that he knew of the attack only when the enemy had penetrated far into his camp. He encountered the enemy on foot, fought him valiantly and met a warrior's death before any help could reach him from any quarter. Ja'far b. 'Abdur Rahman who had gone to the succour of al-Muhallab during the day was still in al-Muhallab's camp when he received the news of his father's distress. Forthwith he rushed to his help but fell in an engagement with the Azraqites who blocked his way and was removed wounded from the field. Al-Muhallab also hastened to dispatch his son Harīb who succeeded in repelling the enemy attackers. The next morning al-Muhallab himself came and personally led the obsequies of 'Ibn Mikhnaf and his companions (1).

The above account of the circumstances of 'Ibn Mikhnaf's tragic end is recorded in Tab. (2/875) and is further amplified and confirmed by a more detailed parallel account in Kam. Against this generally accepted version, Tab. records (2/876 seq.) another version ascribed to the Kufans. This version of the Kufans, apart from supplying a few details which have been incorporated in the above account, is obviously an attempt to exonerate themselves and their chief of the charge of improvidence and overdrawn contempt for the enemy and to shift the responsibility for the shameful disaster on to the shoulders of the Basrans. According to it, when the Azraqites saw reinforcements coming in a

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(1) Kam. 670.
a continuous stream to al-Muhallab from the camp of Ibn Mīkhnaf, they surmised that the position of Ibn Mīkhnaf must be very weak and untenable and forthwith decided to take advantage of it. Towards evening they left five or six detachments to keep the army of al-Muhallab at bay and turned their main forces to launch a violent attack upon the camp of Ibn Mīkhnaf. In the encounter that ensued Ibn Mīkhnaf was deserted by his people. Still with a handful of faithful companions he continued the fight on a mound till he was killed late after mid-night.

It will be seen that this account differs from the common version only on such points as were unfavourable to the Kūfans and cast a slur upon their name. Thus it is but a mere whitewash. The chief anxiety seems to be to deny the incident of the night-attack which could very well have been avoided if they were wise enough to adopt the counsel of al-Muhallab to provide themselves with a ditch. Further it is insinuated that al-Muhallab and the Başrans remained an indifferent spectator of the massacre of the Kūfans who had been of such valuable help to them during the day. It is expressly alleged that only a few people responded to the call of Jaffar b. ʿAbdul-ʿRahmān to accompany him to the help of his father. But the omission of the fact that al-Muhallab dispatched Ḥabīb who drove back the enemy only betrays a biased mind.
All this seems to have been purposely designed to refute the condemnation that must have been levelled against the Kufans for their indiscretion. It is recorded that 'Abd al-Malik when he announced the death of Ibn Mikhnaf severely criticised and denounced the Kufans(1). There is every reason to suppose that such denunciation must have been general.

There is no doubt that, as the poet Suraqa b. Mirdas complains(2), Ibn Mikhnaf could not be helped by those whom he had so generously helped, but the fact still remains that he courted the disaster by his own indiscretion and over-confidence. His position was so unguarded that the Azraqites took no time in overpowering him and it was impossible for any help to reach him in time and be of much avail.

(1). Tab. 2/877-9.
(2). Vide his elegy on Ibn Mikhnaf:-

(2) Vide his elegy on Ibn Mikhnaf:-

(Tab. 2/880).