

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CONTENTS OF A BARREL.

ÆNEAS spent that day in poring, till his eyes were aching, over letters, ledgers, vouchers, fetched out by his uncle from a barrel in the attic where they had lain in the strings that bound them for fourteen years. The mouse had nibbled at them, and the worm; they were thick with dust. They were all that was left of poor Paul Macmaster, of a life once warm and busy, ardent with zeals and animate with youthful passions; wise often; generous always; sometimes—as it must be with us all—a little foolish. Spread out on a clean cloth on the table, musty-smelling, mildewed and yellow, dead things in a world still briskly going on, they solemnised the parlour as a coffin would have done, so that Annabel must feel like weeping, and take her sewing elsewhere.

She could never bear to see them at any time. When Duncanson had sent the barrel home on the death of Paul and the rupture with her husband, she had gathered the unhappiest of the dead man's letters to them—those of his restless years and spendthrift politics, mad schemes and baffled hopes; she had gathered them altogether with the records of forage and usury from Duncanson, put a sheet on the top of them all as if it were a shroud, and buried them under lumber in the attic. Of all that was in her house, they were the only things not brought out to the green to air in spring.