**She Stoops to Conquer | Plot Summary**

**Prologue**

The speaker laments that the Comic Muse is gravely ill. Spectators in the audience should imagine the play they will watch is a medicine prescribed by a doctor to revive comedy. The audience, then, will judge whether the play is an effective cure.

**Act 1**

At their old-fashioned house in the country, the Hardcastles, a couple in their late 50s, discuss country life and city life. [Mrs. Hardcastle](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/She-Stoops-to-Conquer/character-analysis/%22%20%5Cl%20%22Mrs._Hardcastle) mildly complains of "the rust" of routine in the country, while [Mr. Hardcastle](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/She-Stoops-to-Conquer/character-analysis/%22%20%5Cl%20%22Mr._Hardcastle) dismisses [London](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/She-Stoops-to-Conquer/symbols/%22%20%5Cl%20%22London)'s "follies" and "fopperies." Their talk turns to [Tony Lumpkin](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/She-Stoops-to-Conquer/symbols/%22%20%5Cl%20%22Tony_Lumpkin), Mrs. Hardcastle's son by a former marriage. Mr. Hardcastle evidently considers Tony something of a wastrel. When the young man enters, he refuses his mother's request to refrain from going to the Three Pigeons, the local alehouse, or tavern, where his friends expect him.

In a conversation with his daughter, [Kate Hardcastle](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/She-Stoops-to-Conquer/character-analysis/%22%20%5Cl%20%22Kate_Hardcastle), Mr. Hardcastle reveals he has invited [Charles Marlow](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/She-Stoops-to-Conquer/character-analysis/%22%20%5Cl%20%22Charles_Marlow), the son of an old friend, to visit that very day as a potential husband for her. Kate assents, although she expresses some reservations to her cousin, [Constance Neville](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/She-Stoops-to-Conquer/character-analysis/%22%20%5Cl%20%22Constance_Neville). Constance's aunt and guardian, Mrs. Hardcastle, is eager for Constance to marry [Tony Lumpkin](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/She-Stoops-to-Conquer/character-analysis/%22%20%5Cl%20%22Tony_Lumpkin) as a means of keeping Constance's inheritance within the family.

At the Three Pigeons alehouse, Tony Lumpkin entertains his comrades with a rollicking drinking song. The landlord announces the arrival of two young visitors who seem to be from London. When the travelers confess they are lost, Tony plays a practical joke, giving them complex directions to the Hardcastles' house but leading them to believe the private residence is really an inn.

**Act 2**

At the Hardcastles' house, Mr. Hardcastle is training his rather awkward servants to display good manners when visitors arrive, for the family is not used to entertaining guests. After some banter with the staff, Hardcastle hospitably receives the young travelers, Charles Marlow and [George Hastings](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/She-Stoops-to-Conquer/character-analysis/%22%20%5Cl%20%22George_Hastings). The two visitors are under the impression Mr. Hardcastle is an innkeeper—a misunderstanding that gives occasion for some lightly comic asides.

Constance Neville, who is Hastings's sweetheart, enters and quickly realizes her cousin, Tony Lumpkin, has played another of his practical jokes. But she and Hastings decide not to clear up the matter with Marlow and thus continue pretending the house is an inn. The young man's first encounter with Kate Hardcastle develops awkwardly, with Marlow suffering acutely from bashfulness. He is timid and reserved with young ladies of high social status and far more at ease with young women from humbler backgrounds, like barmaids. This personality trait gives Kate the idea of impersonating the "inn's" barmaid because she finds Marlow appealing and because he has already mistaken her for that role. She will, as the title suggests, "stoop," socially, "to conquer."

Toward the end of the act, Mrs. Hardcastle indulges her fascination with London and fashionable ways by discussing the city and the latest style trends with Hastings. Unknown to her, Hastings plans to elope with Constance and to enlist Tony Lumpkin for the success of this project.

**Act 3**

Hardcastle and Kate discuss their contrasting reactions to young Marlow. Kate's father finds the young man unaccountably impudent, but Kate reassures him she believes Marlow to be exemplary.

Tony rushes in to exclaim he has succeeded in filching the jewel casket that contains Constance's inheritance. The jewels should be a welcome resource for Constance and George Hastings in their elopement plan. Constance, in fact, has been pestering her aunt to give them to her, but Mrs. Hardcastle has refused, hoping to make a match between Constance and Tony and thus keep the jewels in the family. Now Mrs. Hardcastle is distraught upon discovering her bureau has been broken into and the jewels taken.

As Kate Hardcastle proceeds with her plan to masquerade as a barmaid, Marlow is enchanted with her, flirts openly, and attempts to embrace her. Kate's father witnesses this attempt and scolds his daughter. He is ready to ask the visitors to leave because of Marlow's impudence, but Kate says she will prove the young man's worth if her father will grant her one hour to do so.

**Act 4**

George Hastings and Constance Neville discuss the whereabouts of the jewel casket just before their elopement. The casket, it turns out, has taken a circuitous route. After Tony gave it to him, George consigned it to Charles Marlow for safekeeping. Charles then gave it to the "landlady," Mrs. Hardcastle. So the jewels are back where they started. Hastings resigns himself to elopement without Constance's fortune.

Marlow waxes eloquent on the looks and appeal of the "barmaid." But then Kate's father enters in an angry frame of mind. What he regards as the insolence of his guests has exhausted his patience. He demands that Marlow leave the house. Marlow, almost as intemperate, demands Hardcastle give him the bill. Kate, determined to deceive Marlow as long as she can, pretends she is a "poor relation" of the family. But the truth about the Hardcastle residence is soon unveiled, and Marlow is mortified with embarrassment.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Hardcastle reads a letter from Hastings to Tony regarding the planned elopement. Furious, she rants she will convey Constance to Aunt Pedigree for safekeeping. Hastings and Marlow both express their irritation and frustration to Tony, who promises at the end of the act that he will save the day.

**Act 5**

Hastings ascertains from a servant at Mr. Hardcastle's house that Mrs. Hardcastle has ridden off with Constance Neville. Sir Charles Marlow, young Charles Marlow's father, has arrived at the house. He now enters with Hardcastle, both of them expressing amusement at the misidentification of Hardcastle as an innkeeper. Young Marlow enters to apologize. Hardcastle teases him on his forward approach to Kate. Kate arrives and is questioned by both her father and Sir Charles. When asked about Marlow's feelings, she answers that young Charles did, indeed, profess affection for her—after he has denied such sentiments. Kate invites both fathers to conceal themselves behind a screen to witness the truth of her statements.

The scene changes to the Hardcastles' garden where Hastings meets Tony Lumpkin, who asserts he has led Mrs. Hardcastle and Constance around in a circle rather than to Aunt Pedigree's house. Expressing his gratitude, Hastings exits. Mrs. Hardcastle enters, frightened by the confusing journey in the darkness. Repeatedly encouraging her not to be afraid, Tony leads his mother to believe they are far from home and may encounter a "highwayman." He urges her to conceal herself. Mr. Hardcastle enters. His appearance adds to Mrs. Hardcastle's consternation. Hastings and Constance then enter, furthering the confusion. Constance tells Hastings she has decided not to elope but to seek Hardcastle's consent for their marriage.

Back inside, Sir Charles and Mr. Hardcastle, from their vantage point behind the screen, witness the encounter between Kate and young Charles. Kate reveals she is Mr. Hardcastle's daughter. Tony Lumpkin formally renounces romantic interest in Constance, and the play ends with the prospects of marriage: Constance to Hastings and Kate to young Marlow.

**Epilogues 1 and 2**

In Epilogue 1, delivered by the performer playing Kate Hardcastle, [Goldsmith](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/She-Stoops-to-Conquer/author/) summarizes the progress of the plot, emphasizing how Kate "stooped to conquer." In Epilogue 2, delivered by the character of Tony Lumpkin, the speaker boasts of his carefree spirit and independence.