

# Cracking Chestnuts—Triple to Duple Minor: Careless Sally

by *David Smukler*

There are many grand old dances that are triple minor contras. In earlier columns we have presented some favorite triples (Genet's Recall, British Sorrow and The Young Widow). It turns out that many—though not all—triples can be done in either triple or duple formation.

Remember that the “minor set” is your home group of dancers within a contra dance. By taking hands four we establish a minor set of two couples (or “duple minor”). Most of the interaction is within this group. Taking hands six establishes a triple minor set (not that the old timers ever took hands...). Dancing in triple minor formation has a character all its own, in large part because the number one couple has two support couples with whom to interact instead of one. Frequently the ones progress early in the sequence to the place between the two other couples in the minor set, and then do one figure with the couple below and another with the couple above. Some figures, such as heys for three or contra corners, seem to be designed with groups of three couples in mind.

Triple minors also once had a social function: that of teaching the dance. One couple that knew a dance could teach the entire set with no need for a walk through. Dudley Laufman, who still uses this approach in many situations, describes how.

Most if not all the longways dances were proper triple minors. First couple would start the dance, do the figure with the second couple, then with the third. This would take about a minute or a minute and a half. The original first couple would then dance with the fourth couple, and at the same time the new top couple would leap into the fray. So it would continue until all had been first couple. The rooms the upper crust danced in were smallish—space for maybe 8 couples at a time. The lower crust danced in kitchens or over the woodshed. Maybe outdoors. Sets were never long; don't forget, no PA systems. There were no callers, at least not as we know them today. Even the dancing masters didn't call. It was probably considered rude to shout. You learned the dance in class so you could do it sans calls. At parties, the first couple having chosen the dance proceeded to show the others by example. No caller. No bands either. The gentry might have what we call an orchestra: two violins, a cello, maybe a flute, maybe a spinet or harpsichord. Mostly though folks had to make do with just a fiddle.

The reason we like the old way of starting a contra is that you have the music going from the get-go and the dance is on its way. Those watching can grasp the idea so that when it reaches them they have an idea of what is going on.<sup>1</sup>

Anyway, somewhere along the line, some bright young troublemaker discovered that many triple minor dances could be converted to duple minor by having the number two couple play a *double* support role, acting as “twos” for the couple on one side and “threes” for the couple on the other side. The best known example of this is Chorus Jig, with its contra corners figure in which the standing dancers alternately turn an active person coming first from one direction and then the other. In Chorus Jig, the trick has become so popular that the original triple minor version has all but disappeared. Because the number one couple is interacting with couples on either side, it will seem to the ones that the compressed version of a once-triple-minor dance retains much of the feel of the original. But the other couples are now required to be much more alert, and they also move more quickly to the top of the set.

The first time we encountered the dance Careless Sally was at a workshop at the 1990 Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend, in which several triple minor dances were presented. The workshop leader was Ted Sannella and Careless Sally was the last dance of the session. Ted told us that the

dance had an alternate title, Calais Sally, pronounced as if the two words rhyme: Cally Sally. Ted started us out in a long triple minor set. Then after running the dance a half dozen times or so, he began starting each top couple after one turn of waiting out instead of two. This meant that the top of the set began doing the duple version of the dance even as the rest of the set was still dancing the older triple version. The “duple-ness” gradually propagated itself down the set. It is difficult to describe just how exciting this was, and it instantly made the dance one of our personal favorites. We have since taken to calling the original triple minor version Careless Sally, and the duple adaptation Calais Sally. (If any reader knows more about the origin of this alternate title, write me.)

Here are both versions—

**Careless Sally** (as a triple proper contra dance)

- A1 Couple one give right hand to partner and balance (4), turn by the right once and a half (8) and (now improper) go down the outside to second place, couple two moving up as they do so (4)
- A2 Couple one give left hand to partner and balance, turn by the left once and a half and go down the outside (proper) one more place to the spot below couple three
- B1 Couple one circle left with the couple above (couple three)  
Couple one come up the center and cast off with couple two
- B2 Top four (couples one and two), right and left through, over and back

**Calais Sally** (as a duple proper contra dance)

- A1 Couple one give right hand to partner and balance (4), turn by the right once and a half (8) and (now improper) go down the outside below couple two, who move up as they do so (4)
- A2 Couple one give left hand to partner and balance, turn by the left once and a half and go down the outside (now proper) one *more* place to the spot below the next neighbor
- B1 Ones facing up and twos facing down, all circle to the left  
Couple one up the center and cast off proper with original neighbors
- B2 Same four, right and left through, over and back

Similar as they seem written down on a page, consider how different these two feel to dancers.

In the original Careless Sally the ones balance, turn and go below the twos, balance again, turn again and go below the threes. All the drama occurs within the same minor set, and all eyes within that set are upon them. Having moved two places down, the first couple will move one place back up in the second half of the dance. First they visit with the threes by circling with them, and then they come up the center to cast off with the twos, a familiar progression in the world of chestnuts. Everyone has had a turn to interact, and all eyes are still on the ones. Following a cast off with a final right and left four, of course, was once even more common than something like “circle left three-quarters and swing your partner” is today.

Now, we truly love the excitement of compressing this action into Calais Sally as a duple minor contra dance. But a careful walk through is important to avoid some pitfalls. Consider, for example, the perspective of the number two dancers if they are not well prepared. First they watch their “real” neighbors go below them (so far, so good). Then a new, never-before-seen set of neighbors also goes below them while the first neighbors temporarily disappear into contra-oblivion. Suddenly, these strangers, who are below of all things, want to circle with them. Not only that, but the circle has to get all the way around—no fudging. Whew, that’s done... Oops! Here come the original neighbors wanting to cast off. And how do you do that proper right and left four again? Who backs up; who goes forward?

For couple one the two versions will, naturally, not feel quite so different from each other, although the total travel distance in the A parts is slightly longer in the duple version. A potential

hazard for the first couple in either version is that A1 is supposed to be danced with the right hand, and A2 with left hand. Dancers can be reassured that it does not much matter if they get the hands wrong sometimes. What Sally does seem to require is that the ones pay attention to whether they are proper or improper. The dance keeps shifting them back and forth. That is, in fact, where much of the dance's story interest comes from, although most dancers are not tuned into this any more. We are used to the idea that the choreography should put us in the right place if we simply leave the lady on the right and the gent on the left, but Careless Sally suggests a different mindset about how to decide which side to be on. You start out where you "belong." Then you go to the other line (shocking!), after which, of course, you come back and propriety is restored. Dancers have become so habituated to duple improper dances that the little buzz that once attended a visit to the opposite line is no longer something that we notice.

Both the triple minor and duple minor versions of Careless Sally have much to offer, and we would encourage callers to add both to their repertoire. However, we should also alert you to one last potential trouble spot that is created when Careless Sally is compressed into a duple proper format. It is at the head of the set, where an "end effect" has been created that can get people into trouble. It happens when there is a couple waiting out at the top, and then the first active couple (just below the waiters-out) abandons their neighbors to work with the next group of twos. This seems to create something of a power vacuum; there is an enormous temptation for the couple waiting out to jump in and circle with those twos who have been abandoned. This can be done, but only if the improvisers really know what they are doing. Otherwise some well-intended enthusiasm can result in things getting muddled and extra people getting tangled in the cast.<sup>2</sup>

Ralph Page discovered Careless Sally in the "Otsego" manuscript, a dancing master's collection from 1808, and published it along with a tune of his own composition, "Careless Sally's Reel," in *The Ralph Page Book of Contras* (EFDSS, 1969). At that time he wrote:

This dance may easily be turned into a duple proper by starting the dance with first, third, fifth, etc. couples acting as first couples. Experienced groups seem to prefer it better as a duple longways. It sure is a "busy" dance when done that way!<sup>3</sup>

Almost half a century later, either version of Careless Sally is still a surprising and delightful change of pace for contemporary dancers, who enjoy its tight timing and intense partner interaction.

Remember, feedback about the Cracking Chestnuts column is always welcome. Write to David Smukler at 226 Kensington Place, Syracuse, NY 13210, or [info@syracusecountrydancers.org](mailto:info@syracusecountrydancers.org).

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication to the author, May 12, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Just for the record, here is what we try to do while waiting out at the top in Calais Sally (duple version). First we somehow get ourselves improper during the A1 part, perhaps with a partner swing, since there is none in the dance. This sets us up to do the left hand balance, turn and cast in A2, putting us below the lonesome twos. After circling left with them, however, it is vital that we move up to clear the path for the real ones, so that they can cast off with their original neighbors. And of course, since it is a proper dance, we must remember not to cross over again.

Given that most dancers are unlikely to work out something like this on the fly, consider issuing a warning like the following when teaching Calais Sally as a duple minor dance: "If you are waiting out at the top, unless you are sure-sure-sure that you know how to safely improvise, please *continue* to wait out. It may feel like there are a lot of folks temporarily standing still around you. But don't worry; this is just the calm before the storm. You will be plenty busy very soon."

<sup>3</sup> English Folk Dance and Song Society; used with permission.

*"Careless Sally" is the eighth dance discussed in the Cracking Chestnuts series, and appeared in the CDSS News, issue #186, September/October 2005. The column also is posted on [www.davidsmukler.syracusecountrydancers.org/](http://www.davidsmukler.syracusecountrydancers.org/).*