

Naval Construction for Friendly Powers.

It will be seen by our Washington despatch to-day that our government is likely to come into very serious discussions with Spain and Peru on the question of the monitors sold to the latter Power. The question originates in an error on the part of the late administration, which encumbered the sale of those ships with conditions that no Power can enforce by peaceful means and which the inexorable march of events may render it impossible to comply with. It is authoritatively stated that in the contract there is a stipulation that the vessels shall not be used against the Spanish Power in Cuba. We suppose the object in making the condition was to further the interests of peace. It could not have been to cover our duties as a friendly and neutral nation, for these go no further, in the case of two belligerents with both of whom we are at peace, than acting with equal justice to both. Thus, if we sell ships to one party we are bound to do the same to the other if demanded. Anything more than this forms an exceptional case, and such we suppose the case of the two Peruvian monitors to be. Negotiations for peace between these two belligerents are now going on under the auspices of our government, and it no doubt was desirable that we should lend ourselves to no act that would mar these labors.

But it occurs to us to inquire what may be the position of the administration at Washington in a possible and, in view of recent events, a probable event. The Spanish government is now building in our private dockyards thirty steam gunboats for war purposes. Does the government purpose to impose any condition on the departure of these from our ports? Suppose the Peruvian Minister were to ask Mr. Fish to require from Spain the same guarantee that has been demanded of Peru in relation to the monitors, could Mr. Fish require it, and, if required, could it be made effectual? If the gunboats are sent to Cuba they will relieve from active employment a dozen Spanish ships of war. The peace negotiations may fall through and hostilities be renewed between Peru and Spain. Could the dozen Spanish ships relieved from duty in Cuban waters by the arrival of the thirty American built gunboats be prevented by us from capturing the Peruvian monitors? We cite these peculiarities in the reported position of our government because they may very easily lead to great complications. We already have on hand one awkward case in the steamer Quaker City, seized at the request of the Spanish Minister and claimed by the Minister of Great Britain as property of a British subject.

These suggestions show the danger which a timorous diplomacy may lead us into. There is a possibility in trying to stand erect of leaning a little backward, and we trust that Mr. Fish is in no danger of being led into this error. The only safe ground for our government to stand upon is the admitted rule of international law that commerce in arms, ships and munitions of war, even to belligerents, may rightfully be held if we allow the same privileges to both belligerents. We are now selling ships, arms and munitions abundantly to Spain, and in view of this fact the condition imposed on the sale of the monitors to Peru is an unjust one and should be withdrawn. We advise Secretary Fish, in order to save himself from future complications, to advise both Spain and Peru that our government withdraws this condition. If he does not do so it becomes then the duty of the Peruvian Minister to call for a detention of the Spanish gunboats. Let justice be done.