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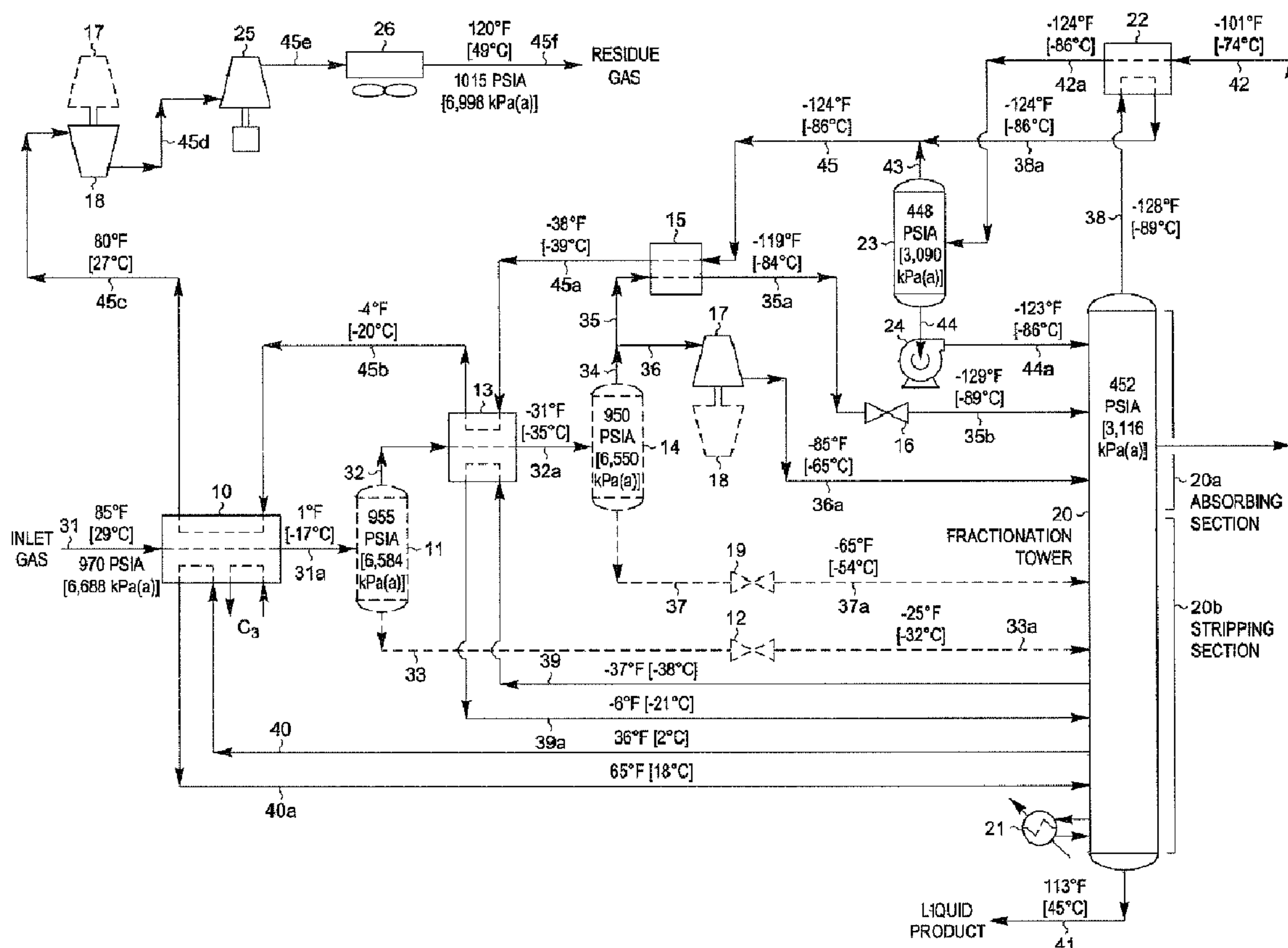
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(54) **Titre : TRAITEMENT DE GAZ D'HYDROCARBURES**

(54) **Title: HYDROCARBON GAS PROCESSING**



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

A process for the recovery of ethane, ethylene, propane, propylene, and heavier hydrocarbon components from a hydrocarbon gas stream is disclosed. The stream is cooled and divided into first and second streams. The first stream is further cooled to

(57) Abrégé(suite)/Abstract(continued):

condense substantially all of it and is thereafter expanded to the fractionation tower pressure and supplied to the fractionation tower at a first mid-column feed position. The second stream is expanded to the tower pressure and is then supplied to the column at a second mid- column feed position. A vapor distillation stream is withdrawn from the column above the feed point of the second stream and is then directed into heat exchange relation with the tower overhead vapor stream to cool the vapor distillation stream and condense at least a part of it, forming a condensed stream.

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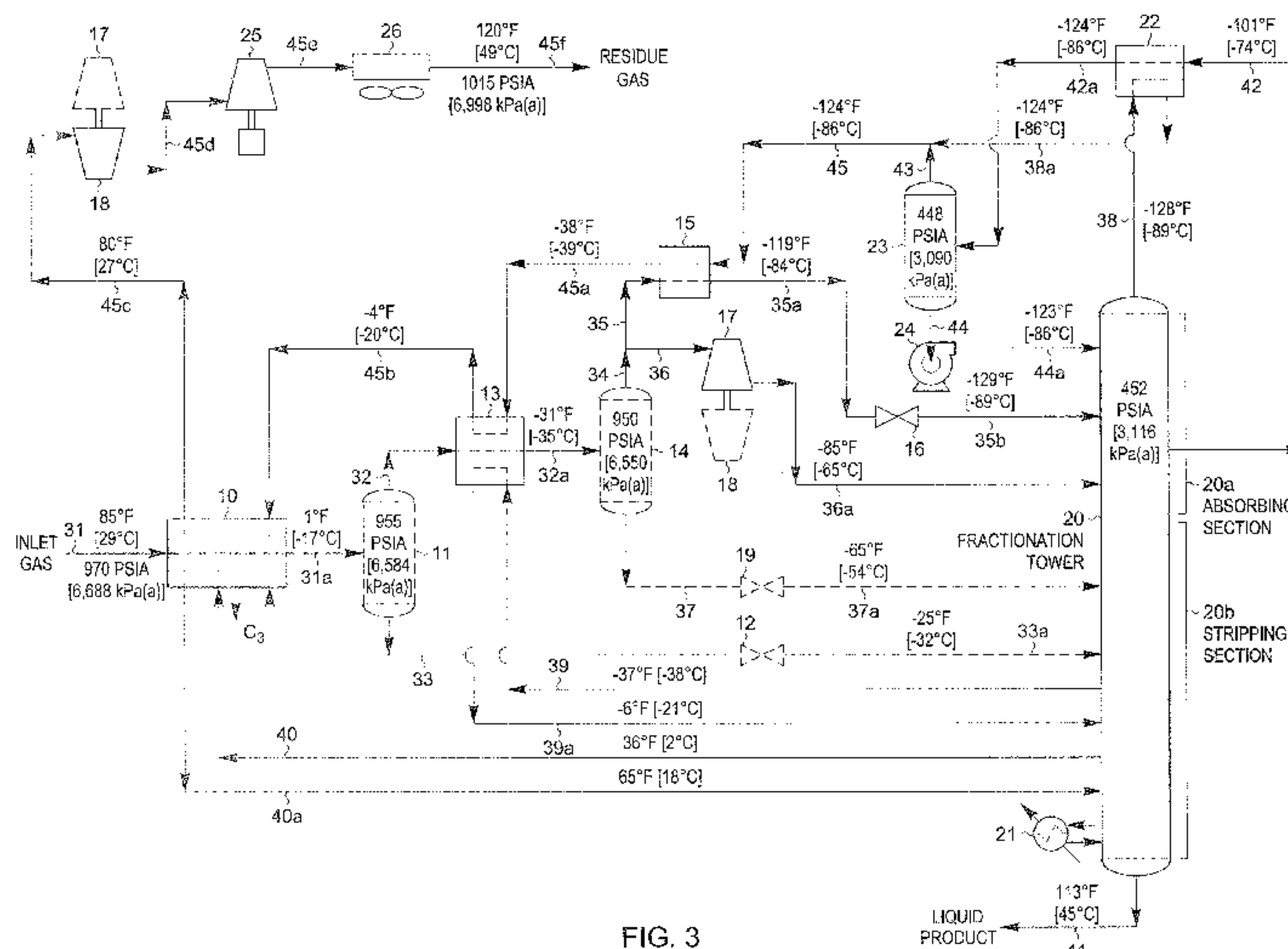


FIG. 3

(57) Abstract: A process for the recovery of ethane, ethylene, propane, propylene, and heavier hydrocarbon components from a hydrocarbon gas stream is disclosed. The stream is cooled and divided into first and second streams. The first stream is further cooled to condense substantially all of it and is thereafter expanded to the fractionation tower pressure and supplied to the fractionation tower at a first mid-column feed position. The second stream is expanded to the tower pressure and is then supplied to the column at a second mid-column feed position. A vapor distillation stream is withdrawn from the column above the feed point of the second stream and is then directed into heat exchange relation with the tower overhead vapor stream to cool the vapor distillation stream and condense at least a part of it, forming a condensed stream.

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HYDROCARBON GAS PROCESSING

SPECIFICATION

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] This invention relates to a process and apparatus for the separation of a gas containing hydrocarbons. The applicants claim the benefits under Title 35, United States Code, Section 119(e) of prior U.S. Provisional Applications Number 60/980,833 which was filed on October 18, 2007 and Number 61/025,910 which was filed on February 4, 2008.

[0002] Ethylene, ethane, propylene, propane, and/or heavier hydrocarbons can be recovered from a variety of gases, such as natural gas, refinery gas, and synthetic gas streams obtained from other hydrocarbon materials such as coal, crude oil, naphtha, oil shale, tar sands, and lignite. Natural gas usually has a major proportion of methane and ethane, i.e., methane and ethane together comprise at least 50 mole percent of the gas. The gas also contains relatively lesser amounts of heavier hydrocarbons such as propane, butanes, pentanes, and the like, as well as hydrogen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and other gases.

[0003] The present invention is generally concerned with the recovery of ethylene, ethane, propylene, propane and heavier hydrocarbons from such gas streams. A typical analysis of a gas stream to be processed in accordance with this invention would be, in approximate mole percent, 80.8% methane, 9.4% ethane and other C₂ components, 4.7% propane and other C₃ components, 1.2% iso-butane, 2.1%

normal butane, and 1.1% pentanes plus, with the balance made up of nitrogen and carbon dioxide. Sulfur containing gases are also sometimes present.

[0004] The historically cyclic fluctuations in the prices of both natural gas and its natural gas liquid (NGL) constituents have at times reduced the incremental value of ethane, ethylene, propane, propylene, and heavier components as liquid products. This has resulted in a demand for processes that can provide more efficient recoveries of these products, for processes that can provide efficient recoveries with lower capital investment, and for processes that can be easily adapted or adjusted to vary the recovery of a specific component over a broad range. Available processes for separating these materials include those based upon cooling and refrigeration of gas, oil absorption, and refrigerated oil absorption. Additionally, cryogenic processes have become popular because of the availability of economical equipment that produces power while simultaneously expanding and extracting heat from the gas being processed. Depending upon the pressure of the gas source, the richness (ethane, ethylene, and heavier hydrocarbons content) of the gas, and the desired end products, each of these processes or a combination thereof may be employed.

[0005] The cryogenic expansion process is now generally preferred for natural gas liquids recovery because it provides maximum simplicity with ease of startup, operating flexibility, good efficiency, safety, and good reliability. U.S. Patent Nos. 3,292,380; 4,061,481; 4,140,504; 4,157,904; 4,171,964; 4,185,978; 4,251,249; 4,278,457; 4,519,824; 4,617,039; 4,687,499; 4,689,063; 4,690,702; 4,854,955; 4,869,740; 4,889,545; 5,275,005; 5,555,748; 5,566,554; 5,568,737; 5,771,712; 5,799,507; 5,881,569; 5,890,378; 5,983,664; 6,182,469; 6,578,379; 6,712,880; 6,915,662; 7,191,617; 7,219,513; reissue U.S. Patent No. 33,408; and co-pending application nos. 11/430,412; 11/839,693; and 11/971,491 describe relevant processes

(although the description of the present invention in some cases is based on different processing conditions than those described in the cited U.S. Patents).

[0006] In a typical cryogenic expansion recovery process, a feed gas stream under pressure is cooled by heat exchange with other streams of the process and/or external sources of refrigeration such as a propane compression-refrigeration system. As the gas is cooled, liquids may be condensed and collected in one or more separators as high-pressure liquids containing some of the desired C₂+ components. Depending on the richness of the gas and the amount of liquids formed, the high-pressure liquids may be expanded to a lower pressure and fractionated. The vaporization occurring during expansion of the liquids results in further cooling of the stream. Under some conditions, pre-cooling the high pressure liquids prior to the expansion may be desirable in order to further lower the temperature resulting from the expansion. The expanded stream, comprising a mixture of liquid and vapor, is fractionated in a distillation (demethanizer or deethanizer) column. In the column, the expansion cooled stream(s) is (are) distilled to separate residual methane, nitrogen, and other volatile gases as overhead vapor from the desired C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components as bottom liquid product, or to separate residual methane, C₂ components, nitrogen, and other volatile gases as overhead vapor from the desired C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components as bottom liquid product.

[0007] If the feed gas is not totally condensed (typically it is not), the vapor remaining from the partial condensation can be split into two streams. One portion of the vapor is passed through a work expansion machine or engine, or an expansion valve, to a lower pressure at which additional liquids are condensed as a result of further cooling of the stream. The pressure after expansion is essentially the same as

the pressure at which the distillation column is operated. The combined vapor-liquid phases resulting from the expansion are supplied as feed to the column.

[0008] The remaining portion of the vapor is cooled to substantial condensation by heat exchange with other process streams, e.g., the cold fractionation tower overhead. Some or all of the high-pressure liquid may be combined with this vapor portion prior to cooling. The resulting cooled stream is then expanded through an appropriate expansion device, such as an expansion valve, to the pressure at which the demethanizer is operated. During expansion, a portion of the liquid will vaporize, resulting in cooling of the total stream. The flash expanded stream is then supplied as top feed to the demethanizer. Typically, the vapor portion of the flash expanded stream and the demethanizer overhead vapor combine in an upper separator section in the fractionation tower as residual methane product gas. Alternatively, the cooled and expanded stream may be supplied to a separator to provide vapor and liquid streams. The vapor is combined with the tower overhead and the liquid is supplied to the column as a top column feed.

[0009] In the ideal operation of such a separation process, the residue gas leaving the process will contain substantially all of the methane in the feed gas with essentially none of the heavier hydrocarbon components, and the bottoms fraction leaving the demethanizer will contain substantially all of the heavier hydrocarbon components with essentially no methane or more volatile components. In practice, however, this ideal situation is not obtained because the conventional demethanizer is operated largely as a stripping column. The methane product of the process, therefore, typically comprises vapors leaving the top fractionation stage of the column, together with vapors not subjected to any rectification step. Considerable losses of C₂, C₃, and C₄+ components occur because the top liquid feed contains substantial quantities of these components and heavier hydrocarbon components,

resulting in corresponding equilibrium quantities of C₂ components, C₃ components, C₄ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components in the vapors leaving the top fractionation stage of the demethanizer. The loss of these desirable components could be significantly reduced if the rising vapors could be brought into contact with a significant quantity of liquid (reflux) capable of absorbing the C₂ components, C₃ components, C₄ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components from the vapors.

[0010] In recent years, the preferred processes for hydrocarbon separation use an upper absorber section to provide additional rectification of the rising vapors. The source of the reflux stream for the upper rectification section is typically a recycled stream of residue gas supplied under pressure. The recycled residue gas stream is usually cooled to substantial condensation by heat exchange with other process streams, e.g., the cold fractionation tower overhead. The resulting substantially condensed stream is then expanded through an appropriate expansion device, such as an expansion valve, to the pressure at which the demethanizer is operated. During expansion, a portion of the liquid will usually vaporize, resulting in cooling of the total stream. The flash expanded stream is then supplied as top feed to the demethanizer. Typically, the vapor portion of the expanded stream and the demethanizer overhead vapor combine in an upper separator section in the fractionation tower as residual methane product gas. Alternatively, the cooled and expanded stream may be supplied to a separator to provide vapor and liquid streams, so that thereafter the vapor is combined with the tower overhead and the liquid is supplied to the column as a top column feed. Typical process schemes of this type are disclosed in U.S. Patent Nos. 4,889,545; 5,568,737; and 5,881,569, and in Mowrey, E. Ross, "Efficient, High Recovery of Liquids from Natural Gas Utilizing a High Pressure Absorber", Proceedings of the Eighty-First Annual Convention of the Gas Processors Association, Dallas, Texas, March 11-13, 2002. Unfortunately, these

processes require the use of a compressor to provide the motive force for recycling the reflux stream to the demethanizer, adding to both the capital cost and the operating cost of facilities using these processes.

[0011] The present invention also employs an upper rectification section (or a separate rectification column if plant size or other factors favor using separate rectification and stripping columns). However, the reflux stream for this rectification section is provided by using a side draw of the vapors rising in a lower portion of the tower. Because of the relatively high concentration of C₂ components in the vapors lower in the tower, a significant quantity of liquid can be condensed in this side draw stream without elevating its pressure, often using only the refrigeration available in the cold vapor leaving the upper rectification section. This condensed liquid, which is predominantly liquid methane, can then be used to absorb C₂ components, C₃ components, C₄ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components from the vapors rising through the upper rectification section and thereby capture these valuable components in the bottom liquid product from the demethanizer.

[0012] Heretofore, such a side draw feature has been employed in C₃+ recovery systems, as illustrated in the assignee's U.S. Patent No. 5,799,507, as well as in C₂+ recovery systems, as illustrated in the assignee's U.S. Patent No. 7,191,617. Surprisingly, applicants have found that altering the withdrawal location of the side draw feature of the assignee's U.S. Patent No. 7,191,617 invention improves the C₂+ recoveries and the system efficiency with no increase in capital or operating cost.

[0013] In accordance with the present invention, it has been found that C₂ recovery in excess of 87% and C₃ and C₄+ recoveries in excess of 99 percent can be obtained without the need for compression of the reflux stream for the demethanizer. The present invention provides the further advantage of being able to maintain in excess of 99 percent recovery of the C₃ and C₄+ components as the recovery of C₂

components is adjusted from high to low values. In addition, the present invention makes possible essentially 100 percent separation of methane and lighter components from the C₂ components and heavier components at the same energy requirements compared to the prior art while increasing the recovery levels. The present invention, although applicable at lower pressures and warmer temperatures, is particularly advantageous when processing feed gases in the range of 400 to 1500 psia [2,758 to 10,342 kPa(a)] or higher under conditions requiring NGL recovery column overhead temperatures of -50°F [-46°C] or colder.

[0014] For a better understanding of the present invention, reference is made to the following examples and drawings. Referring to the drawings:

[0015] FIG. 1 is a flow diagram of a prior art natural gas processing plant in accordance with United States Patent No. 4,278,457;

[0016] FIG. 2 is a flow diagram of a prior art natural gas processing plant in accordance with United States Patent No. 7,191,617;

[0017] FIG. 3 is a flow diagram of a natural gas processing plant in accordance with the present invention; and

[0018] FIGS. 4 through 8 are flow diagrams illustrating alternative means of application of the present invention to a natural gas stream.

[0019] In the following explanation of the above figures, tables are provided summarizing flow rates calculated for representative process conditions. In the tables appearing herein, the values for flow rates (in moles per hour) have been rounded to the nearest whole number for convenience. The total stream rates shown in the tables include all non-hydrocarbon components and hence are generally larger than the sum of the stream flow rates for the hydrocarbon components. Temperatures indicated are approximate values rounded to the nearest degree. It should also be noted that the process design calculations performed for the purpose of comparing the processes

depicted in the figures are based on the assumption of no heat leak from (or to) the surroundings to (or from) the process. The quality of commercially available insulating materials makes this a very reasonable assumption and one that is typically made by those skilled in the art.

[0020] For convenience, process parameters are reported in both the traditional British units and in the units of the Système International d'Unités (SI). The molar flow rates given in the tables may be interpreted as either pound moles per hour or kilogram moles per hour. The energy consumptions reported as horsepower (HP) and/or thousand British Thermal Units per hour (MBTU/Hr) correspond to the stated molar flow rates in pound moles per hour. The energy consumptions reported as kilowatts (kW) correspond to the stated molar flow rates in kilogram moles per hour.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRIOR ART

[0021] FIG. 1 is a process flow diagram showing the design of a processing plant to recover C₂+ components from natural gas using prior art according to U.S. Pat. No. 4,278,457. In this simulation of the process, inlet gas enters the plant at 85°F [29°C] and 970 psia [6,688 kPa(a)] as stream 31. If the inlet gas contains a concentration of sulfur compounds which would prevent the product streams from meeting specifications, the sulfur compounds are removed by appropriate pretreatment of the feed gas (not illustrated). In addition, the feed stream is usually dehydrated to prevent hydrate (ice) formation under cryogenic conditions. Solid desiccant has typically been used for this purpose.

[0022] The feed stream 31 is cooled in heat exchanger 10 by heat exchange with cool residue gas at -6°F [-21°C] (stream 38b), demethanizer lower side reboiler liquids at 30°F [-1°C] (stream 40), and propane refrigerant. The reboiler liquids are heated to 62°F [17°C] (stream 40a). Note that in all cases

exchanger 10 is representative of either a multitude of individual heat exchangers or a single multi-pass heat exchanger, or any combination thereof. (The decision as to whether to use more than one heat exchanger for the indicated cooling services will depend on a number of factors including, but not limited to, inlet gas flow rate, heat exchanger size, stream temperatures, etc.) The cooled stream 31a enters separator 11 at 0°F [-18°C] and 955 psia [6,584 kPa(a)] where the vapor (stream 32) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream 33). The separator liquid (stream 33) is expanded to the operating pressure (approximately 445 psia [3,068 kPa(a)]) of fractionation tower 20 by expansion valve 12, cooling stream 33a to -27°F [-33°C] before it is supplied to fractionation tower 20 at a lower mid-column feed point.

[0023] The vapor (stream 32) from separator 11 is further cooled in heat exchanger 13 by heat exchange with cool residue gas at -34°F [-37°C] (stream 38a) and demethanizer upper side reboiler liquids at -38°F [-39°C] (stream 39). The reboiler liquids are heated to -12°F [-24°C] (stream 39a). The cooled stream 32a enters separator 14 at -27°F [-33°C] and 950 psia [6,550 kPa(a)] where the vapor (stream 34) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream 37). The separator liquid (stream 37) is expanded to the tower operating pressure by expansion valve 19, cooling stream 37a to -61°F [-52°C] before it is supplied to fractionation tower 20 at a second lower mid-column feed point.

[0024] The vapor (stream 34) from separator 14 is divided into two streams, 35 and 36. Stream 35, containing about 38% of the total vapor, passes through heat exchanger 15 in heat exchange relation with the cold residue gas at -124°F [-87°C] (stream 38) where it is cooled to substantial condensation. The resulting substantially condensed stream 35a at -119°F [-84°C] is then flash expanded through expansion valve 16 to the operating pressure of fractionation tower 20. During expansion a portion of the stream is vaporized, resulting in cooling of the total stream. In the

process illustrated in FIG. 1, the expanded stream **35b** leaving expansion valve **16** reaches a temperature of -130°F [-90°C] and is supplied to separator section **20a** in the upper region of fractionation tower **20**. The liquids separated therein become the top feed to demethanizing section **20b**.

[0025] The remaining 62% of the vapor from separator **14** (stream **36**) enters a work expansion machine **17** in which mechanical energy is extracted from this portion of the high pressure feed. The machine **17** expands the vapor substantially isentropically to the tower operating pressure, with the work expansion cooling the expanded stream **36a** to a temperature of approximately -83°F [-64°C]. The typical commercially available expanders are capable of recovering on the order of 80-85% of the work theoretically available in an ideal isentropic expansion. The work recovered is often used to drive a centrifugal compressor (such as item **18**) that can be used to re-compress the residue gas (stream **38c**), for example. The partially condensed expanded stream **36a** is thereafter supplied as feed to fractionation tower **20** at an upper mid-column feed point.

[0026] The demethanizer in tower **20** is a conventional distillation column containing a plurality of vertically spaced trays, one or more packed beds, or some combination of trays and packing. As is often the case in natural gas processing plants, the fractionation tower may consist of two sections. The upper section **20a** is a separator wherein the partially vaporized top feed is divided into its respective vapor and liquid portions, and wherein the vapor rising from the lower distillation or demethanizing section **20b** is combined with the vapor portion of the top feed to form the cold demethanizer overhead vapor (stream **38**) which exits the top of the tower at -124°F [-87°C]. The lower, demethanizing section **20b** contains the trays and/or packing and provides the necessary contact between the liquids falling downward and the vapors rising upward. The demethanizing section **20b** also includes reboilers

(such as reboiler 21 and the side reboilers described previously) which heat and vaporize a portion of the liquids flowing down the column to provide the stripping vapors which flow up the column to strip the liquid product, stream 41, of methane and lighter components.

[0027] The liquid product stream 41 exits the bottom of the tower at 113°F [45°C], based on a typical specification of a methane to ethane ratio of 0.025:1 on a molar basis in the bottom product. The residue gas (demethanizer overhead vapor stream 38) passes countercurrently to the incoming feed gas in heat exchanger 15 where it is heated to -34°F [-37°C] (stream 38a), in heat exchanger 13 where it is heated to -6°F [-21°C] (stream 38b), and in heat exchanger 10 where it is heated to 80°F [27°C] (stream 38c). The residue gas is then re-compressed in two stages. The first stage is compressor 18 driven by expansion machine 17. The second stage is compressor 25 driven by a supplemental power source which compresses the residue gas (stream 38d) to sales line pressure (stream 38e). After cooling to 120°F [49°C] in discharge cooler 26, the residue gas product (stream 38f) flows to the sales gas pipeline at 1015 psia [6,998 kPa(a)], sufficient to meet line requirements (usually on the order of the inlet pressure).

[0028] A summary of stream flow rates and energy consumption for the process illustrated in FIG. 1 is set forth in the following table:

Table I

(FIG. 1)

Stream Flow Summary - Lb. Moles/Hr [kg moles/Hr]

<u>Stream</u>	<u>Methane</u>	<u>Ethane</u>	<u>Propane</u>	<u>Butanes+</u>	<u>Total</u>
31	53,228	6,192	3,070	2,912	65,876
32	49,244	4,670	1,650	815	56,795
33	3,984	1,522	1,420	2,097	9,081
34	47,675	4,148	1,246	445	53,908
37	1,569	522	404	370	2,887
35	18,117	1,576	473	169	20,485
36	29,558	2,572	773	276	33,423
38	53,098	978	44	4	54,460
41	130	5,214	3,026	2,908	11,416

Recoveries*

Ethane	84.20%
Propane	98.58%
Butanes+	99.88%

Power

Residue Gas Compression	23,635 HP	[38,855 kW]
Refrigerant Compression	7,535 HP	[12,388 kW]
Total Compression	31,170 HP	[51,243 kW]

* (Based on un-rounded flow rates)

[0029] FIG. 2 represents an alternative prior art process according to U.S. Pat. No. 7,191,617. The process of FIG. 2 has been applied to the same feed gas composition and conditions as described above for FIG. 1. In the simulation of this process, as in the simulation for the process of FIG. 1, operating conditions were selected to minimize energy consumption for a given recovery level.

[0030] In the simulation of the FIG. 2 process, inlet gas enters the plant as stream 31 and is cooled in heat exchanger 10 by heat exchange with cool residue gas at -5°F [-20°C] (stream 45b), demethanizer lower side reboiler liquids at 33°F [0°C] (stream 40), and propane refrigerant. The cooled stream 31a enters separator 11 at 0°F [-18°C] and 955 psia [6,584 kPa(a)] where the vapor (stream 32) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream 33). The separator liquid (stream 33) is expanded to the operating pressure (approximately 450 psia [3,103 kPa(a)]) of fractionation tower 20 by expansion valve 12, cooling stream 33a to -27°F [-33°C] before it is supplied to fractionation tower 20 at a lower mid-column feed point.

[0031] The vapor (stream 32) from separator 11 is further cooled in heat exchanger 13 by heat exchange with cool residue gas at -36°F [-38°C] (stream 45a) and demethanizer upper side reboiler liquids at -38°F [-39°C] (stream 39). The cooled stream 32a enters separator 14 at -29°F [-34°C] and 950 psia [6,550 kPa(a)] where the vapor (stream 34) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream 37). The separator liquid (stream 37) is expanded to the tower operating pressure by expansion valve 19, cooling stream 37a to -64°F [-53°C] before it is supplied to fractionation tower 20 at a second lower mid-column feed point.

[0032] The vapor (stream 34) from separator 14 is divided into two streams, 35 and 36. Stream 35, containing about 37% of the total vapor, passes through heat

exchanger **15** in heat exchange relation with the cold residue gas at -120°F [-84°C] (stream **45**) where it is cooled to substantial condensation. The resulting substantially condensed stream **35a** at -115°F [-82°C] is then flash expanded through expansion valve **16** to the operating pressure of fractionation tower **20**. During expansion a portion of the stream is vaporized, resulting in cooling of stream **35b** to -129°F [-89°C] before it is supplied to fractionation tower **20** at an upper mid-column feed point.

[0033] The remaining 63% of the vapor from separator **14** (stream **36**) enters a work expansion machine **17** in which mechanical energy is extracted from this portion of the high pressure feed. The machine **17** expands the vapor substantially isentropically to the tower operating pressure, with the work expansion cooling the expanded stream **36a** to a temperature of approximately -84°F [-65°C]. The partially condensed expanded stream **36a** is thereafter supplied as feed to fractionation tower **20** at a third lower mid-column feed point.

[0034] The demethanizer in tower **20** consists of two sections: an upper absorbing (rectification) section **20a** that contains the trays and/or packing to provide the necessary contact between the vapor portion of the expanded streams **35b** and **36a** rising upward and cold liquid falling downward to condense and absorb the ethane, propane, and heavier components from the vapors rising upward; and a lower, stripping section **20b** that contains the trays and/or packing to provide the necessary contact between the liquids falling downward and the vapors rising upward. The demethanizing section **20b** also includes reboilers (such as reboiler **21** and the side reboilers described previously) which heat and vaporize a portion of the liquids flowing down the column to provide the stripping vapors which flow up the column to strip the liquid product, stream **41**, of methane and lighter components. Stream **36a** enters demethanizer **20** at an intermediate feed position located in the lower region of

absorbing section **20a** of demethanizer **20**. The liquid portion of the expanded stream commingles with liquids falling downward from the absorbing section **20a** and the combined liquid continues downward into the stripping section **20b** of demethanizer **20**. The vapor portion of the expanded stream rises upward through absorbing section **20a** and is contacted with cold liquid falling downward to condense and absorb the ethane, propane, and heavier components.

[0035] A portion of the distillation vapor (stream **42**) is withdrawn from the upper region of stripping section **20b**. This stream is then cooled from -91°F [-68°C] to -122°F [-86°C] and partially condensed (stream **42a**) in heat exchanger **22** by heat exchange with the cold demethanizer overhead stream **38** exiting the top of demethanizer **20** at -127°F [-88°C]. The cold demethanizer overhead stream is warmed slightly to -120°F [-84°C] (stream **38a**) as it cools and condenses at least a portion of stream **42**.

[0036] The operating pressure in reflux separator **23** (447 psia [3,079 kPa(a)]) is maintained slightly below the operating pressure of demethanizer **20**. This provides the driving force which causes distillation vapor stream **42** to flow through heat exchanger **22** and thence into the reflux separator **23** wherein the condensed liquid (stream **44**) is separated from any uncondensed vapor (stream **43**). Stream **43** then combines with the warmed demethanizer overhead stream **38a** from heat exchanger **22** to form cold residue gas stream **45** at -120°F [-84°C].

[0037] The liquid stream **44** from reflux separator **23** is pumped by pump **24** to a pressure slightly above the operating pressure of demethanizer **20**, and stream **44a** is then supplied as cold top column feed (reflux) to demethanizer **20**. This cold liquid reflux absorbs and condenses the propane and heavier components rising in the upper rectification region of absorbing section **20a** of demethanizer **20**.

[0038] In stripping section 20b of demethanizer 20, the feed streams are stripped of their methane and lighter components. The resulting liquid product (stream 41) exits the bottom of tower 20 at 114°F [45°C]. The distillation vapor stream forming the tower overhead (stream 38) is warmed in heat exchanger 22 as it provides cooling to distillation stream 42 as described previously, then combines with vapor stream 43 from reflux separator 23 to form the cold residue gas stream 45. The residue gas passes countercurrently to the incoming feed gas in heat exchanger 15 where it is heated to -36°F [-38°C] (stream 45a), in heat exchanger 13 where it is heated to -5°F [-20°C] (stream 45b), and in heat exchanger 10 where it is heated to 80°F [27°C] (stream 45c) as it provides cooling as previously described. The residue gas is then re-compressed 45d, 45e in two stages, compressor 18 driven by expansion machine 17 and compressor 25 driven by a supplemental power source. After stream 45e is cooled to 120°F [49°C] in discharge cooler 26, the residue gas product (stream 45f) flows to the sales gas pipeline at 1015 psia [6,998 kPa(a)].

[0039] A summary of stream flow rates and energy consumption for the process illustrated in FIG. 2 is set forth in the following table:

Table II

(FIG. 2)

Stream Flow Summary - Lb. Moles/Hr [kg moles/Hr]

<u>Stream</u>	<u>Methane</u>	<u>Ethane</u>	<u>Propane</u>	<u>Butanes+</u>	<u>Total</u>
31	53,228	6,192	3,070	2,912	65,876
32	49,244	4,670	1,650	815	56,795
33	3,984	1,522	1,420	2,097	9,081
34	47,440	4,081	1,204	420	53,536
37	1,804	589	446	395	3,259
35	17,553	1,510	445	155	19,808
36	29,887	2,571	759	265	33,728
38	48,675	811	23	1	49,805
42	5,555	373	22	2	6,000
43	4,421	113	2	0	4,562
44	1,134	260	20	2	1,438
45	53,096	924	25	1	54,367
41	132	5,268	3,045	2,911	11,509

Recoveries*

Ethane	85.08%
Propane	99.20%
Butanes+	99.98%

Power

Residue Gas Compression	23,636 HP	[38,857 kW]
Refrigerant Compression	7,561 HP	[12,430 kW]
Total Compression	31,197 HP	[51,287 kW]

* (Based on un-rounded flow rates)

[0040] A comparison of Tables I and II shows that, compared to the FIG. 1 process, the FIG. 2 process improves ethane recovery from 84.20% to 85.08%, propane recovery from 98.58% to 99.20%, and butanes+ recovery from 99.88% to 99.98%. Comparison of Tables I and II further shows that the improvement in yields was achieved using essentially the same power requirements.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTIONExample 1

[0041] FIG. 3 illustrates a flow diagram of a process in accordance with the present invention. The feed gas composition and conditions considered in the process presented in FIG. 3 are the same as those in FIGS. 1 and 2. Accordingly, the FIG. 3 process can be compared with that of the FIGS. 1 and 2 processes to illustrate the advantages of the present invention.

[0042] In the simulation of the FIG. 3 process, inlet gas enters the plant as stream **31** and is cooled in heat exchanger **10** by heat exchange with cool residue gas at -4°F [-20°C] (stream **45b**), demethanizer lower side reboiler liquids at 36°F [2°C] (stream **40**), and propane refrigerant. The cooled stream **31a** enters separator **11** at 1°F [-17°C] and 955 psia [6,584 kPa(a)] where the vapor (stream **32**) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream **33**). The separator liquid (stream **33**) is expanded to the operating pressure (approximately 452 psia [3,116 kPa(a)]) of fractionation tower **20** by expansion valve **12**, cooling stream **33a** to -25°F [-32°C] before it is supplied to fractionation tower **20** at a lower mid-column feed point.

[0043] The vapor (stream **32**) from separator **11** is further cooled in heat exchanger **13** by heat exchange with cool residue gas at -38°F [-39°C] (stream **45a**) and demethanizer upper side reboiler liquids at -37°F [-38°C] (stream **39**). The cooled stream **32a** enters separator **14** at -31°F [-35°C] and 950 psia [6,550 kPa(a)] where the vapor (stream **34**) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream **37**). The separator liquid (stream **37**) is expanded to the tower operating pressure by expansion valve **19**, cooling stream **37a** to -65°F [-54°C] before it is supplied to fractionation tower **20** at a second lower mid-column feed point.

[0044] The vapor (stream **34**) from separator **14** is divided into two streams, **35** and **36**. Stream **35**, containing about 38% of the total vapor, passes through heat exchanger **15** in heat exchange relation with the cold residue gas at -124°F [-86°C] (stream **45**) where it is cooled to substantial condensation. The resulting substantially condensed stream **35a** at -119°F [-84°C] is then flash expanded through expansion valve **16** to the operating pressure of fractionation tower **20**. During expansion a portion of the stream is vaporized, resulting in cooling of the total stream. In the process illustrated in FIG. 3, the expanded stream **35b** leaving expansion valve **16**

reaches a temperature of -129°F [-89°C] and is supplied to fractionation tower **20** at an upper mid-column feed point.

[0045] The remaining 62% of the vapor from separator **14** (stream **36**) enters a work expansion machine **17** in which mechanical energy is extracted from this portion of the high pressure feed. The machine **17** expands the vapor substantially isentropically to the tower operating pressure, with the work expansion cooling the expanded stream **36a** to a temperature of approximately -85°F [-65°C]. The partially condensed expanded stream **36a** is thereafter supplied as feed to fractionation tower **20** at a third lower mid-column feed point.

[0046] The demethanizer in tower **20** is a conventional distillation column containing a plurality of vertically spaced trays, one or more packed beds, or some combination of trays and packing. The demethanizer tower consists of two sections: an upper absorbing (rectification) section **20a** that contains the trays and/or packing to provide the necessary contact between the vapor portion of the expanded streams **35b** and **36a** rising upward and cold liquid falling downward to condense and absorb the C_2 components, C_3 components, and heavier components from the vapors rising upward; and a lower, stripping section **20b** that contains the trays and/or packing to provide the necessary contact between the liquids falling downward and the vapors rising upward. The demethanizing section **20b** also includes reboilers (such as reboiler **21** and the side reboilers described previously) which heat and vaporize a portion of the liquids flowing down the column to provide the stripping vapors which flow up the column to strip the liquid product, stream **41**, of methane and lighter components. Stream **36a** enters demethanizer **20** at an intermediate feed position located in the lower region of absorbing section **20a** of demethanizer **20**. The liquid portion of the expanded stream commingles with liquids falling downward from the absorbing section **20a** and the combined liquid continues downward into the stripping

section **20b** of demethanizer **20**. The vapor portion of the expanded stream rises upward through absorbing section **20a** and is contacted with cold liquid falling downward to condense and absorb the C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier components.

[0047] A portion of the distillation vapor (stream **42**) is withdrawn from an intermediate region of absorbing section **20a**, above the feed position of expanded stream **36a** in the lower region of absorbing section **20a**. This distillation vapor stream **42** is then cooled from -101°F [-74°C] to -124°F [-86°C] and partially condensed (stream **42a**) in heat exchanger **22** by heat exchange with the cold demethanizer overhead stream **38** exiting the top of demethanizer **20** at -128°F [-89°C]. The cold demethanizer overhead stream is warmed slightly to -124°F [-86°C] (stream **38a**) as it cools and condenses at least a portion of stream **42**.

[0048] The operating pressure in reflux separator **23** (448 psia [3,090 kPa(a)]) is maintained slightly below the operating pressure of demethanizer **20**. This provides the driving force which causes distillation vapor stream **42** to flow through heat exchanger **22** and thence into the reflux separator **23** wherein the condensed liquid (stream **44**) is separated from any uncondensed vapor (stream **43**). Stream **43** then combines with the warmed demethanizer overhead stream **38a** from heat exchanger **22** to form cold residue gas stream **45** at -124°F [-86°C].

[0049] The liquid stream **44** from reflux separator **23** is pumped by pump **24** to a pressure slightly above the operating pressure of demethanizer **20**, and stream **44a** is then supplied as cold top column feed (reflux) to demethanizer **20** at -123°F [-86°C]. This cold liquid reflux absorbs and condenses the C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier components rising in the upper rectification region of absorbing section **20a** of demethanizer **20**.

[0050] In stripping section **20b** of demethanizer **20**, the feed streams are stripped of their methane and lighter components. The resulting liquid product (stream **41**) exits the bottom of tower **20** at 113°F [45°C]. The distillation vapor stream forming the tower overhead (stream **38**) is warmed in heat exchanger **22** as it provides cooling to distillation stream **42** as described previously, then combines with vapor stream **43** from reflux separator **23** to form the cold residue gas stream **45**. The residue gas passes countercurrently to the incoming feed gas in heat exchanger **15** where it is heated to -38°F [-39°C] (stream **45a**), in heat exchanger **13** where it is heated to -4°F [-20°C] (stream **45b**), and in heat exchanger **10** where it is heated to 80°F [27°C] (stream **45c**) as it provides cooling as previously described. The residue gas is then re-compressed in two stages, compressor **18** driven by expansion machine **17** and compressor **25** driven by a supplemental power source. After stream **45e** is cooled to 120°F [49°C] in discharge cooler **26**, the residue gas product (stream **45f**) flows to the sales gas pipeline at 1015 psia [6,998 kPa(a)].

[0051] A summary of stream flow rates and energy consumption for the process illustrated in FIG. 3 is set forth in the following table:

Table III

(FIG. 3)

Stream Flow Summary - Lb. Moles/Hr [kg moles/Hr]

<u>Stream</u>	<u>Methane</u>	<u>Ethane</u>	<u>Propane</u>	<u>Butanes+</u>	<u>Total</u>
31	53,228	6,192	3,070	2,912	65,876
32	49,340	4,702	1,672	831	56,962
33	3,888	1,490	1,398	2,081	8,914
34	47,289	4,040	1,179	404	53,301
37	2,051	662	493	427	3,661
35	17,828	1,523	444	152	20,094
36	29,461	2,517	735	252	33,207
38	49,103	691	19	0	50,103
42	4,946	285	8	0	5,300
43	3,990	93	1	0	4,119
44	956	192	7	0	1,181
45	53,093	784	20	0	54,222
41	135	5,408	3,050	2,912	11,654

Recoveries*

Ethane	87.33%
Propane	99.36%
Butanes+	99.99%

Power

Residue Gas Compression	23,518 HP	[38,663 kW]
Refrigerant Compression	7,554 HP	[12,419 kW]
Total Compression	31,072 HP	[51,082 kW]

* (Based on un-rounded flow rates)

[0052] A comparison of Tables I, II, and III shows that, compared to the prior art, the present invention improves ethane recovery from 84.20% (for FIG. 1) and 85.08% (for FIG. 2) to 87.33%, propane recovery from 98.58% (for FIG. 1) and 99.20% (for FIG. 2) to 99.36%, and butanes+ recovery from 99.88% (for FIG. 1) and 99.98% (for FIG. 2) to 99.99%. Comparison of Tables I, II, and III further shows that the improvement in yields was achieved using slightly less power than the prior art. In terms of the recovery efficiency (defined by the quantity of ethane recovered per unit of power), the present invention represents a 4% improvement over the prior art of the FIG. 1 process and a 3% improvement over the prior art of the FIG. 2 process.

[0053] The improvement in recoveries and recovery efficiency provided by the present invention over that of the prior art of the FIG. 1 process is due to the supplemental rectification provided by reflux stream 44a, which reduces the amount of C₂ components, C₃ components, and C₄+ components contained in the inlet feed gas that is lost to the residue gas. Although the expanded substantially condensed feed stream 35b supplied to absorbing section 20a of demethanizer 20 provides bulk

recovery of the C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components contained in expanded feed **36a** and the vapors rising from stripping section **20b**, it cannot capture all of the C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components due to equilibrium effects because stream **35b** itself contains C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components. However, reflux stream **44a** of the present invention is predominantly liquid methane and contains very little C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components, so that only a small quantity of reflux to the upper rectification region in absorbing section **20a** is sufficient to capture most of the C₂ components and nearly all of the C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components. As a result, in addition to the improvement in ethane recovery, nearly 100% of the propane and essentially all of the heavier hydrocarbon components are recovered in liquid product **41** leaving the bottom of demethanizer **20**. Due to the bulk liquid recovery provided by expanded substantially condensed feed stream **35b**, the quantity of reflux (stream **44a**) needed is small enough that the cold demethanizer overhead vapor (stream **38**) can provide the refrigeration to generate this reflux without significantly impacting the cooling of feed stream **35** in heat exchanger **15**.

[0054] The key feature of the present invention over that of the prior art of the FIG. 2 process is the location of the withdrawal point for distillation vapor stream **42**. Whereas the withdrawal point for the FIG. 2 process is in the upper region of stripping section **20b** of fractionation tower **20**, the present invention withdraws distillation vapor stream **42** from an intermediate region of absorbing section **20a**, above the feed position of expanded stream **36a**. The vapors in this intermediate region of absorbing section **20a** have already been subjected to partial rectification by the cold liquids found in reflux stream **44a** and expanded substantially condensed stream **35b**. As a result, distillation vapor stream **42** of the present invention contains

significantly lower concentrations of C₂ components, C₃ components, and C₄+ components compared to the corresponding stream **42** of the FIG. 2 prior art process, as can be seen by comparing Tables II and III. The resulting reflux stream **44a** can rectify the vapors in absorbing section **20a** more efficiently, reducing the quantity of reflux stream **44a** required and consequently improving the efficiency of the present invention over the prior art.

[0055] Reflux stream **44a** would be even more effective if it contained only methane and more volatile components, and contained no C₂+ components. Unfortunately, it is not possible to condense a sufficient quantity of such reflux from distillation vapor stream **42** using only the refrigeration available in the process streams without elevating the pressure of stream **42** unless it contains at least some C₂+ components. It is necessary to judiciously select the withdrawal location in absorbing section **20a** so that the resulting distillation vapor stream **42** contains enough C₂+ components to be readily condensed, without impairing the effectiveness of reflux stream **44a** by causing it to contain too much C₂+ components. Thus, the location for the withdrawal of distillation vapor stream **42** of the present invention must be evaluated for each application.

Example 2

[0056] An alternative means for withdrawing distillation vapor from the column is shown in another embodiment of the present invention as illustrated in FIG. 4. The feed gas composition and conditions considered in the process presented in FIG. 4 are the same as those in FIGS. 1 through 3. Accordingly, FIG. 4 can be compared with the FIGS. 1 and 2 processes to illustrate the advantages of the present invention, and can likewise be compared to the embodiment displayed in FIG. 3.

[0057] In the simulation of the FIG. 4 process, inlet gas enters the plant as stream **31** and is cooled in heat exchanger **10** by heat exchange with cool residue gas at -4°F [-20°C] (stream **45b**), demethanizer lower side reboiler liquids at 35°F [2°C] (stream **40**), and propane refrigerant. The cooled stream **31a** enters separator **11** at 1°F [-17°C] and 955 psia [6,584 kPa(a)] where the vapor (stream **32**) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream **33**). The separator liquid (stream **33**) is expanded to the operating pressure (approximately 451 psia [3,107 kPa(a)]) of fractionation tower **20** by expansion valve **12**, cooling stream **33a** to -25°F [-32°C] before it is supplied to fractionation tower **20** at a lower mid-column feed point.

[0058] The vapor (stream **32**) from separator **11** is further cooled in heat exchanger **13** by heat exchange with cool residue gas at -40°F [-40°C] (stream **45a**) and demethanizer upper side reboiler liquids at -37°F [-39°C] (stream **39**). The cooled stream **32a** enters separator **14** at -32°F [-35°C] and 950 psia [6,550 kPa(a)] where the vapor (stream **34**) is separated from the condensed liquid (stream **37**). The separator liquid (stream **37**) is expanded to the tower operating pressure by expansion valve **19**, cooling stream **37a** to -67°F [-55°C] before it is supplied to fractionation tower **20** at a second lower mid-column feed point.

[0059] The vapor (stream **34**) from separator **14** is divided into two streams, **35** and **36**. Stream **35**, containing about 37% of the total vapor, passes through heat exchanger **15** in heat exchange relation with the cold residue gas at -123°F [-86°C] (stream **45**) where it is cooled to substantial condensation. The resulting substantially condensed stream **35a** at -118°F [-83°C] is then flash expanded through expansion valve **16** to the operating pressure of fractionation tower **20**. During expansion a portion of the stream is vaporized, resulting in cooling of the total stream. In the process illustrated in FIG. 4, the expanded stream **35b** leaving expansion valve **16**

reaches a temperature of -129°F [-90°C] and is supplied to fractionation tower **20** at an upper mid-column feed point.

[0060] The remaining 63% of the vapor from separator **14** (stream **36**) enters a work expansion machine **17** in which mechanical energy is extracted from this portion of the high pressure feed. The machine **17** expands the vapor substantially isentropically to the tower operating pressure, with the work expansion cooling the expanded stream **36a** to a temperature of approximately -86°F [-66°C]. The partially condensed expanded stream **36a** is thereafter supplied as feed to fractionation tower **20** at a third lower mid-column feed point.

[0061] A first portion of distillation vapor (stream **54**) is withdrawn from an intermediate region of absorbing section **20a**, above the feed position of expanded stream **36a** in the lower region of absorbing section **20a**. A second portion of distillation vapor (stream **55**) is withdrawn from the upper region of stripping section **20b**, below the feed position of expanded stream **36a**. The first portion at -105°F [-76°C] is combined with the second portion at -92°F [-69°C] to form combined vapor stream **42**. Combined vapor stream **42** is then cooled from -102°F [-74°C] to -124°F [-87°C] and partially condensed (stream **42a**) in heat exchanger **22** by heat exchange with the cold demethanizer overhead stream **38** exiting the top of demethanizer **20** at -129°F [-90°C]. The cold demethanizer overhead stream is warmed slightly to -122°F [-86°C] (stream **38a**) as it cools and condenses at least a portion of stream **42**.

[0062] The operating pressure in reflux separator **23** (447 psia [3,081 kPa(a)]) is maintained slightly below the operating pressure of demethanizer **20**. This provides the driving force which causes combined vapor stream **42** to flow through heat exchanger **22** and thence into the reflux separator **23** wherein the condensed liquid (stream **44**) is separated from any uncondensed vapor (stream **43**). Stream **43** then

combines with the warmed demethanizer overhead stream **38a** from heat exchanger **22** to form cold residue gas stream **45** at -123°F [-86°C].

[0063] The liquid stream **44** from reflux separator **23** is pumped by pump **24** to a pressure slightly above the operating pressure of demethanizer **20**, and stream **44a** is then supplied as cold top column feed (reflux) to demethanizer **20** at -124°F [-86°C]. This cold liquid reflux absorbs and condenses the C_2 components, C_3 components, and heavier components rising in the upper rectification region of absorbing section **20a** of demethanizer **20**.

[0064] In stripping section **20b** of demethanizer **20**, the feed streams are stripped of their methane and lighter components. The resulting liquid product (stream **41**) exits the bottom of tower **20** at 112°F [44°C]. The distillation vapor stream forming the tower overhead (stream **38**) is warmed in heat exchanger **22** as it provides cooling to distillation stream **42** as described previously, then combines with vapor stream **43** from reflux separator **23** to form the cold residue gas stream **45**. The residue gas passes countercurrently to the incoming feed gas in heat exchanger **15** where it is heated to -40°F [-40°C] (stream **45a**), in heat exchanger **13** where it is heated to -4°F [-20°C] (stream **45b**), and in heat exchanger **10** where it is heated to 80°F [27°C] (stream **45c**) as it provides cooling as previously described. The residue gas is then re-compressed in two stages, compressor **18** driven by expansion machine **17** and compressor **25** driven by a supplemental power source. After stream **45e** is cooled to 120°F [49°C] in discharge cooler **26**, the residue gas product (stream **45f**) flows to the sales gas pipeline at 1015 psia [6,998 kPa(a)].

[0065] A summary of stream flow rates and energy consumption for the process illustrated in FIG. 4 is set forth in the following table:

Table IV

(FIG. 4)

Stream Flow Summary - Lb. Moles/Hr [kg moles/Hr]

<u>Stream</u>	<u>Methane</u>	<u>Ethane</u>	<u>Propane</u>	<u>Butanes+</u>	<u>Total</u>
31	53,228	6,192	3,070	2,912	65,876
32	49,418	4,715	1,678	834	57,064
33	3,810	1,477	1,392	2,078	8,812
34	47,253	4,016	1,162	393	53,213
37	2,165	699	516	441	3,851
35	17,436	1,482	429	145	19,636
36	29,817	2,534	733	248	33,577
38	47,821	652	16	0	48,759
54	4,888	241	7	0	5,200
55	1,576	104	6	1	1,700
42	6,464	345	13	1	6,900
43	5,271	116	1	0	5,434
44	1,193	229	12	1	1,466
45	53,092	768	17	0	54,193
41	136	5,424	3,053	2,912	11,683

Recoveries*

Ethane	87.59%
Propane	99.43%
Butanes+	99.99%

Power

Residue Gas Compression	23,612 HP	[38,818 kW]
Refrigerant Compression	7,470 HP	[12,281 kW]
Total Compression	31,082 HP	[51,099 kW]

* (Based on un-rounded flow rates)

[0066] A comparison of Tables III and IV shows that, compared to the FIG. 3 embodiment of the present invention, the FIG. 4 embodiment further improves ethane recovery from 87.33% to 87.59% and propane recovery from 99.36% to 99.43%. Comparison of Tables III and IV further shows that the improvement in yields was achieved using essentially the same amount of power. In terms of the recovery efficiency (defined by the quantity of ethane recovered per unit of power), the FIG. 4 embodiment of the present invention maintains the 4% improvement over the prior art of the FIG. 1 process and the 3% improvement over the prior art of the FIG. 2 process.

[0067] The improvement in recoveries for the FIG. 4 embodiment of the present invention over that of the FIG. 3 embodiment is due to the increase in the quantity of reflux stream 44a for the FIG. 4 embodiment. As can be seen by comparing Tables III and IV, the flow rate of reflux stream 44a is 24% higher for the FIG. 4 embodiment. The higher reflux rate improves the supplemental rectification in the upper region of absorbing section 20a, which reduces the amount of C₂

components, C_3 components, and C_4+ components contained in the inlet feed gas that is lost to the residue gas.

[0068] This higher reflux rate is possible because the combined vapor stream 42 of the FIG. 4 embodiment is more easily condensed than distillation vapor stream 42 in the FIG. 3 embodiment. It should be noted that a portion (stream 55) of combined vapor stream 42 is withdrawn from distillation column 20 below the mid-column feed position of expanded stream 36a. As such, stream 55 has been subjected to less rectification than the other portion (stream 54) which is withdrawn above the mid-column feed position of expanded stream 36a, and so it has higher concentrations of C_2+ components. As a result, combined vapor stream 42 of the FIG. 4 embodiment has slightly higher concentrations of C_3+ components than distillation vapor stream 42 of the FIG. 3 embodiment, allowing more of the stream to be condensed as it is cooled by column overhead stream 38.

[0069] In essence, withdrawing portions of the distillation vapor at different locations on the distillation column allows tailoring the composition of the combined vapor stream 42 to optimize the production of reflux for a given set of operating conditions. It is necessary to judiciously select the withdrawal locations in absorbing section 20a and stripping section 20b, as well as the relative quantities withdrawn at each location, so that the resulting combined vapor stream 42 contains enough C_2+ components to be readily condensed, without impairing the effectiveness of reflux stream 44a by causing it to contain too much C_2+ components. The increase in recoveries for this embodiment over that of the FIG. 3 embodiment must be evaluated for each application relative to the slight increase in capital cost expected for the FIG. 4 embodiment compared to the FIG. 3 embodiment.

Other Embodiments

[0070] In accordance with this invention, it is generally advantageous to design the absorbing (rectification) section of the demethanizer to contain multiple theoretical separation stages. However, the benefits of the present invention can be achieved with as few as two theoretical stages. For instance, all or a part of the pumped condensed liquid (stream 44a) leaving reflux separator 23 and all or a part of the expanded substantially condensed stream 35b from expansion valve 16 can be combined (such as in the piping joining the expansion valve to the demethanizer) and if thoroughly intermingled, the vapors and liquids will mix together and separate in accordance with the relative volatilities of the various components of the total combined streams. Such commingling of the two streams, combined with contacting at least a portion of expanded stream 36a, shall be considered for the purposes of this invention as constituting an absorbing section.

[0071] FIGS. 3 through 6 depict fractionation towers constructed in a single vessel. FIGS. 7 and 8 depict fractionation towers constructed in two vessels, absorber (rectifier) column 27 (a contacting and separating device) and stripper (distillation) column 20. In such cases, a portion of the distillation vapor (stream 54) is withdrawn from the lower section of absorber column 27 and routed to reflux condenser 22 (optionally, combined with a portion, stream 55, of overhead vapor stream 50 from stripper column 20) to generate reflux for absorber column 27. The remaining portion (stream 51) of overhead vapor stream 50 from stripper column 20 flows to the lower section of absorber column 27 to be contacted by reflux stream 52 and expanded substantially condensed stream 35b. Pump 28 is used to route the liquids (stream 47) from the bottom of absorber column 27 to the top of stripper column 20 so that the two towers effectively function as one distillation system. The decision whether to construct the fractionation tower as a single vessel (such as demethanizer 20 in

FIGS. 3 through 6) or multiple vessels will depend on a number of factors such as plant size, the distance to fabrication facilities, etc.

[0072] Some circumstances may favor mixing the remaining vapor portion of distillation stream **42a** with overhead stream **38** from fractionation column **20** (FIG. 6) or absorber column **27** (FIG. 8), then supplying the mixed stream to heat exchanger **22** to provide cooling of distillation stream **42** or combined vapor stream **42**. As shown in FIGS. 6 and 8, the mixed stream **45** resulting from combining the reflux separator vapor (stream **43**) with overhead stream **38** is routed to heat exchanger **22**.

[0073] As described earlier, the distillation vapor stream **42** or the combined vapor stream **42** is partially condensed and the resulting condensate used to absorb valuable C_2 components, C_3 components, and heavier components from the vapors rising through absorbing section **20a** of demethanizer **20** or through absorber column **27**. However, the present invention is not limited to this embodiment. It may be advantageous, for instance, to treat only a portion of these vapors in this manner, or to use only a portion of the condensate as an absorbent, in cases where other design considerations indicate portions of the vapors or the condensate should bypass absorbing section **20a** of demethanizer **20** or absorber column **27**. Some circumstances may favor total condensation, rather than partial condensation, of distillation vapor stream **42** or combined vapor stream **42** in heat exchanger **22**. Other circumstances may favor that distillation vapor stream **42** be a total vapor side draw from fractionation column **20** rather than a partial vapor side draw. It should also be noted that, depending on the composition of the feed gas stream, it may be advantageous to use external refrigeration to provide partial cooling of distillation vapor stream **42** or combined vapor stream **42** in heat exchanger **22**.

[0074] Feed gas conditions, plant size, available equipment, or other factors may indicate that elimination of work expansion machine 17, or replacement with an alternate expansion device (such as an expansion valve), is feasible. Although individual stream expansion is depicted in particular expansion devices, alternative expansion means may be employed where appropriate. For example, conditions may warrant work expansion of the substantially condensed portion of the feed stream (stream 35a).

[0075] When the inlet gas is leaner, separator 11 in FIGS. 3 and 4 may not be justified. In such cases, the feed gas cooling accomplished in heat exchangers 10 and 13 in FIGS. 3 and 4 may be accomplished without an intervening separator as shown in FIGS. 5 through 8. The decision of whether or not to cool and separate the feed gas in multiple steps will depend on the richness of the feed gas, plant size, available equipment, etc. Depending on the quantity of heavier hydrocarbons in the feed gas and the feed gas pressure, the cooled feed stream 31a leaving heat exchanger 10 in FIGS. 3 through 8 and/or the cooled stream 32a leaving heat exchanger 13 in FIGS. 3 and 4 may not contain any liquid (because it is above its dewpoint, or because it is above its cricondenbar), so that separator 11 shown in FIGS. 3 through 8 and/or separator 14 shown in FIGS. 3 and 4 are not required.

[0076] The high pressure liquid (stream 37 in FIGS. 3 and 4 and stream 33 in FIGS. 5 through 8) need not be expanded and fed to a mid-column feed point on the distillation column. Instead, all or a portion of it may be combined with the portion of the separator vapor (stream 35 in FIGS. 3 and 4 and stream 34 in FIGS. 5 through 8) flowing to heat exchanger 15. (This is shown by the dashed stream 46 in FIGS. 5 through 8.) Any remaining portion of the liquid may be expanded through an appropriate expansion device, such as an expansion valve or expansion machine, and fed to a mid-column feed point on the distillation column (stream 37a in FIGS. 5

through 8). Stream **33** in FIGS. 3 and 4 and stream **37** in FIGS. 3 through 8 may also be used for inlet gas cooling or other heat exchange service before or after the expansion step prior to flowing to the demethanizer.

[0077] In accordance with the present invention, the use of external refrigeration to supplement the cooling available to the inlet gas from other process streams may be employed, particularly in the case of a rich inlet gas. The use and distribution of separator liquids and demethanizer side draw liquids for process heat exchange, and the particular arrangement of heat exchangers for inlet gas cooling must be evaluated for each particular application, as well as the choice of process streams for specific heat exchange services.

[0078] Some circumstances may favor using a portion of the cold distillation liquid leaving absorbing section **20a** or absorber column **27** for heat exchange, such as dashed stream **49** in FIGS. 5 through 8. Although only a portion of the liquid from absorbing section **20a** or absorber column **27** can be used for process heat exchange without reducing the ethane recovery in demethanizer **20** or stripper column **20**, more duty can sometimes be obtained from these liquids than with liquids from stripping section **20b** or stripper column **20**. This is because the liquids in absorbing section **20a** of demethanizer **20** (or absorber column **27**) are available at a colder temperature level than those in stripping section **20b** (or stripper column **20**).

[0079] As shown by dashed stream **53** in FIGS. 5 through 8, in some cases it may be advantageous to split the liquid stream from reflux pump **24** (stream **44a**) into at least two streams. A portion (stream **53**) can then be supplied to the stripping section of fractionation tower **20** (FIGS. 5 and 6) or the top of stripper column **20** (FIGS. 7 and 8) to increase the liquid flow in that part of the distillation system and improve the rectification, thereby reducing the concentration of C_2+ components in

stream 42. In such cases, the remaining portion (stream 52) is supplied to the top of absorbing section 20a (FIGS. 5 and 6) or absorber column 27 (FIGS. 7 and 8).

[0080] In accordance with the present invention, the splitting of the vapor feed may be accomplished in several ways. In the processes of FIGS. 3 through 8, the splitting of vapor occurs following cooling and separation of any liquids which may have been formed. The high pressure gas may be split, however, prior to any cooling of the inlet gas or after the cooling of the gas and prior to any separation stages. In some embodiments, vapor splitting may be effected in a separator.

[0081] It will also be recognized that the relative amount of feed found in each branch of the split vapor feed will depend on several factors, including gas pressure, feed gas composition, the amount of heat which can economically be extracted from the feed, and the quantity of horsepower available. More feed to the top of the column may increase recovery while decreasing power recovered from the expander thereby increasing the recompression horsepower requirements. Increasing feed lower in the column reduces the horsepower consumption but may also reduce product recovery. The relative locations of the mid-column feeds may vary depending on inlet composition or other factors such as desired recovery levels and amount of liquid formed during inlet gas cooling. Moreover, two or more of the feed streams, or portions thereof, may be combined depending on the relative temperatures and quantities of individual streams, and the combined stream then fed to a mid-column feed position.

[0082] The present invention provides improved recovery of C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components per amount of utility consumption required to operate the process. An improvement in utility consumption required for operating the demethanizer process may appear in the form of reduced power requirements for compression or re-compression, reduced power requirements

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for external refrigeration, reduced energy requirements for tower reboilers, or a combination thereof.

[0083] While there have been described what are believed to be preferred embodiments of the invention, those skilled in the art will recognize that other and further modifications may be made thereto, e.g. to adapt the invention to various conditions, types of feed, or other requirements.

WE CLAIM:

1. In a process for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in which process

(a) said gas stream **31** is cooled **10** under pressure to provide a cooled stream **31a**;

(b) said cooled stream **31a** is expanded **17** to a lower pressure whereby it is a further cooled stream; and

(c) said further cooled stream is directed into a distillation column **20** and fractionated at said lower pressure whereby the components of said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered;

characterized in that following cooling **10**, said cooled stream **31a**, **32** is divided into first **34** and second **36** streams; and

(1) said first stream **34, 35** is cooled **15** to condense substantially all of it **35a** and is thereafter expanded **16** to said lower pressure whereby it is further cooled **35b**;

(2) said expanded cooled first stream **35b** is thereafter supplied to said distillation column **20** at a first mid-column feed position;

(3) said second stream **36** is expanded **17** to said lower pressure **36a** and is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a second mid-column feed position;

(4) a vapor distillation stream **54, 42** is withdrawn from a region of said distillation column **20** above said expanded second stream **36a** and is cooled **22** sufficiently

to condense at least a part of it **42a**, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**;

(5) at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44**, **44a** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a top feed position;

(6) an overhead vapor stream **38** is withdrawn from an upper region of said distillation column **20** and is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said vapor distillation stream **54**, **42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (4), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(7) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52**, **35b**, **36a** to said distillation column **20** are effective to maintain the overhead temperature of said distillation column **20** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

2. In a process for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane, C_2 components, C_3 components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C_2 components, C_3 components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C_3 components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in which process

(a) said gas stream **31** is cooled **10** under pressure to provide a cooled stream **31a**;

(b) said cooled stream **31a** is expanded **17** to a lower pressure whereby it is a further cooled stream; and

(c) said further cooled stream is directed into a distillation column **20** and fractionated at said lower pressure whereby the components of said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered;

characterized in that said gas stream **31** is cooled **10** sufficiently to partially condense it **31a**; and

(1) said partially condensed gas stream **31a** is separated **11** thereby to provide a vapor stream **32** and at least one liquid stream **33**;

(2) said vapor stream **32** is thereafter divided into first **34** and second **36** streams;

(3) said first stream **34, 35** is cooled **15** to condense substantially all of it **35a** and is thereafter expanded **16** to said lower pressure whereby it is further cooled **35b**;

(4) said expanded cooled first stream **35b** is thereafter supplied to said distillation column **20** at a first mid-column feed position;

(5) said second stream **36** is expanded **17** to said lower pressure **36a** and is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a second mid-column feed position;

(6) at least a portion **37** of said at least one liquid stream **33** is expanded **12** to said lower pressure **37a** and is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a third mid-column feed position;

(7) a vapor distillation stream **54, 42** is withdrawn from a region of said distillation column **20** above said expanded second stream **36a** and is cooled **22** sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**;

(8) at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44, 44a** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a top feed position;

(9) an overhead vapor stream **38** is withdrawn from an upper region of said distillation column **20** and is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (7), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(10) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52, 35b, 36a** to said distillation column **20** are effective to maintain the overhead temperature of said distillation column **20** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

3. In a process for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in which process

(a) said gas stream **31** is cooled **10** under pressure to provide a cooled stream **31a**;

(b) said cooled stream **31a** is expanded **17** to a lower pressure whereby it is a further cooled stream; and

(c) said further cooled stream is directed into a distillation column **20** and fractionated at said lower pressure whereby the components of said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered;

characterized in that said gas stream **31** is cooled **10** sufficiently to partially condense it **31a**; and

(1) said partially condensed gas stream **31a** is separated **11** thereby to provide a vapor stream **32** and at least one liquid stream **33**;

(2) said vapor stream **32** is thereafter divided into first **34** and second **36** streams;

(3) said first stream **34** is combined with at least a portion **46** of said at least one liquid stream **33** to form a combined stream **35**, and said combined stream **35** is cooled **15** to condense substantially all of it **35a** and is thereafter expanded **16** to said lower pressure whereby it is further cooled **35b**;

(4) said expanded cooled combined stream **35b** is thereafter supplied at a first mid-column feed position to said distillation column **20**;

(5) said second stream **36** is expanded **17** to said lower pressure **36a** and is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a second mid-column feed position;

(6) any remaining portion **37** of said at least one liquid stream **33** is expanded **12** to said lower pressure **37a** and is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a third mid-column feed position;

(7) a vapor distillation stream **54, 42** is withdrawn from a region of said distillation column **20** above said expanded second stream **36a** and is cooled **22** sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**;

(8) at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44, 44a** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a top feed position;

(9) an overhead vapor stream **38** is withdrawn from an upper region of said distillation column **20** and is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (7), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(10) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52, 35b, 36a** to said distillation column **20** are effective to maintain the overhead temperature of said distillation column **20** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

4. In a process for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in which process

(a) said gas stream **31** is cooled **10** under pressure to provide a cooled stream **31a**;

(b) said cooled stream **31a** is expanded **17** to a lower pressure whereby it is a further cooled stream; and

(c) said further cooled stream is directed into a distillation column **20** and fractionated at said lower pressure whereby the components of said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered;

characterized in that following cooling **10**, said cooled stream **31a**, **32** is divided into first **34** and second **36** streams; and

(1) said first stream **34, 35** is cooled **15** to condense substantially all of it **35a** and is thereafter expanded **16** to said lower pressure whereby it is further cooled **35b**;

(2) said expanded cooled first stream **35b** is thereafter supplied at a mid-column feed position to a contacting and separating device **27** that produces a first overhead vapor stream **38** and a bottom liquid stream **47**, whereupon said bottom liquid stream **47, 47a, 48** is supplied to said distillation column **20**;

(3) said second stream **36** is expanded **17** to said lower pressure **36a** and is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at a first lower column feed position;

(4) a second overhead vapor stream **50, 51** is withdrawn from an upper region of said distillation column **20** and is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at a second lower column feed position;

(5) a vapor distillation stream **54, 42** is withdrawn from a region of said contacting and separating device **27** above said expanded second stream **36a** and is cooled **22** sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**;

(6) at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44, 44a** is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at a top feed position;

(7) said first overhead vapor stream **38** is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (5), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated first overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(8) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52, 35b, 36a** to said contacting and separating device **27** are effective to maintain the overhead temperature of

said contacting and separating device **27** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

5. In a process for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in which process

(a) said gas stream **31** is cooled **10** under pressure to provide a cooled stream **31a**;

(b) said cooled stream **31a** is expanded **17** to a lower pressure whereby it is a further cooled stream; and

(c) said further cooled stream is directed into a distillation column **20** and fractionated at said lower pressure whereby the components of said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered;

characterized in that said gas stream **31** is cooled **10** sufficiently to partially condense it **31a**; and

(1) said partially condensed gas stream **31a** is separated **11** thereby to provide a vapor stream **32** and at least one liquid stream **33**;

(2) said vapor stream **32** is thereafter divided into first **34** and second **36** streams;

(3) said first stream **34**, **35** is cooled **15** to condense substantially all of it **35a** and is thereafter expanded **16** to said lower pressure whereby it is further cooled **35b**;

(4) said expanded cooled first stream **35b** is thereafter supplied at a mid-column feed position to a contacting and separating device **27** that produces a first overhead vapor stream **38** and a bottom liquid stream **47**, whereupon said bottom liquid stream **47**, **47a**, **48** is supplied to said distillation column **20**;

(5) said second stream **36** is expanded **17** to said lower pressure and is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at a first lower column feed position;

(6) at least a portion **37** of said at least one liquid stream **33** is expanded **12** to said lower pressure and is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a mid-column feed position;

(7) a second overhead vapor stream **50**, **51** is withdrawn from an upper region of said distillation column **20** and is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at a second lower column feed position;

(8) a vapor distillation stream **54**, **42** is withdrawn from a region of said contacting and separating device **27** above said expanded second stream **36a** and is cooled **22** sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**;

(9) at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44**, **44a** is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at a top feed position;

(10) said first overhead vapor stream **38** is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said vapor distillation stream **54**, **42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (8), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated first overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(11) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52, 35b, 36a** to said contacting and separating device **27** are effective to maintain the overhead temperature of said contacting and separating device **27** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

6. In a process for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in which process

(a) said gas stream **31** is cooled **10** under pressure to provide a cooled stream **31a**;

(b) said cooled stream **31a** is expanded **17** to a lower pressure whereby it is a further cooled stream; and

(c) said further cooled stream is directed into a distillation column **20** and fractionated at said lower pressure whereby the components of said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered;

characterized in that said gas stream **31** is cooled **10** sufficiently to partially condense it **31a**; and

(1) said partially condensed gas stream **31a** is separated **11** thereby to provide a vapor stream **32** and at least one liquid stream **33**;

(2) said vapor stream **32** is thereafter divided into first **34** and second **36** streams;

(3) said first stream **34** is combined with at least a portion **46** of said at least one liquid stream **33** to form a combined stream **35**, and said combined stream **35** is cooled **15** to condense substantially all of it **35a** and is thereafter expanded **16** to said lower pressure whereby it is further cooled **35b**;

(4) said expanded cooled combined stream **35b** is thereafter supplied at a mid-column feed position to a contacting and separating device **27** that produces a first overhead vapor stream **38** and a bottom liquid stream **47**, whereupon said bottom liquid stream **47, 47a, 48** is supplied to said distillation column **20**;

(5) said second stream **36** is expanded **17** to said lower pressure **36a** and is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at a first lower column feed position;

(6) any remaining portion **37** of said at least one liquid stream **33** is expanded **12** to said lower pressure **37a** and is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a mid-column feed position;

(7) a second overhead vapor stream **50, 51** is withdrawn from an upper region of said distillation column **20** and is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at a second lower column feed position;

(8) a vapor distillation stream **54, 42** is withdrawn from a region of said contacting and separating device **27** above said expanded second stream **36a** and is cooled **22** sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**;

(9) at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44, 44a** is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at a top feed position;

(10) said first overhead vapor stream **38** is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (8), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated first overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(11) the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52, 35b, 36a** to said contacting and separating device **27** are effective to maintain the overhead temperature of said contacting and separating device **27** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

7. The process according to claim 1, 2, or 3 wherein

(1) said overhead vapor stream **38** is combined with said residual vapor stream **43** to form a combined vapor stream **45**; and

(2) said combined vapor stream **45** is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a portion of said cooling **22** of said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated combined vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45f**.

8. The process according to claim 4, 5, or 6 wherein

(1) said first overhead vapor stream **38** is combined with said residual vapor stream **43** to form a combined vapor stream **45**; and

(2) said combined vapor stream **45** is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a portion of said cooling **22** of said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated combined vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45f**.

9. The process according to claim 1, 2, or 3 wherein

(1) a second vapor distillation stream **55** is withdrawn from a region of said distillation column **20** below said expanded second stream **36a**;

(2) said vapor distillation stream **54** is combined with said second vapor distillation stream **55** to form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(3) said combined distillation stream **42** is cooled **22** sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**; and

(4) said overhead vapor stream **38** is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said combined distillation stream **42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (3), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**.

10. The process according to claim 1, 2, or 3 wherein

(1) a second vapor distillation stream **55** is withdrawn from a region of said distillation column **20** below said expanded second stream **36a**;

(2) said vapor distillation stream **54** is combined with said second vapor distillation stream **55** to form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(3) said combined distillation stream **42** is cooled **22** sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**;

(4) said overhead vapor stream **38** is combined with said residual vapor stream **43** to form a combined vapor stream **45**; and

(5) said combined vapor stream **45** is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said combined distillation stream **42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a

portion of the cooling **22** of step (3), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated combined vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45f**.

11. The process according to claim 4, 5, or 6 wherein

(1) said second overhead stream **50** is divided into a second vapor distillation stream **55** and a third vapor distillation stream **51**, whereupon said third vapor distillation stream **51** is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at said second lower column feed position;

(2) said vapor distillation stream **54** is combined with said second vapor distillation stream **55** to form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(3) said combined distillation stream **42** is cooled **22** sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**; and

(4) said first overhead vapor stream **38** is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said combined distillation stream **42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (3), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated first overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**.

12. The process according to claim 4, 5, or 6 wherein

(1) said second overhead stream **50** is divided into a second vapor distillation stream **55** and a third vapor distillation stream **51**, whereupon said third vapor distillation stream **51** is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at said second lower column feed position;

(2) said vapor distillation stream **54** is combined with said second vapor distillation stream **55** to form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(3) said combined distillation stream **42** is cooled **22** sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**;

(4) said first overhead vapor stream **38** is combined with said residual vapor stream **43** to form a combined vapor stream **45**; and

(5) said combined vapor stream **45** is directed into heat exchange relation **22** with said combined distillation stream **42** and heated, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (3), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated combined vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45f**.

13. The process according to claim 1, 2, or 3 wherein

(1) said condensed stream **44, 44a** is divided into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said first portion **52** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at said top feed position; and

(3) said second portion **53** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a mid-column feed position below that of said expanded second stream **36a**.

14. The process according to claim 7 wherein

(1) said condensed stream **44, 44a** is divided into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said first portion **52** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at said top feed position; and

(3) said second portion **53** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a mid-column feed position below that of said expanded second stream **36a**.

15. The process according to claim 9 wherein

- (1) said condensed stream **44, 44a** is divided into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;
- (2) said first portion **52** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at said top feed position; and
- (3) said second portion **53** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a mid-column feed position, said mid-column feed position being in substantially the same region wherein said second vapor distillation stream **55** is withdrawn.

16. The process according to claim 10 wherein

- (1) said condensed stream **44, 44a** is divided into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;
- (2) said first portion **52** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at said top feed position; and
- (3) said second portion **53** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a mid-column feed position, said mid-column feed position being in substantially the same region wherein said second vapor distillation stream **55** is withdrawn.

17. The process according to claim 4, 5, or 6 wherein

- (1) said condensed stream **44, 44a** is divided into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;
- (2) said first portion **52** is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at said top feed position; and
- (3) said second portion **53** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a top feed position.

18. The process according to claim 8 wherein

(1) said condensed stream **44, 44a** is divided into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said first portion **52** is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at said top feed position; and

(3) said second portion **53** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a top feed position.

19. The process according to claim 11 wherein

(1) said condensed stream **44, 44a** is divided into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said first portion **52** is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at said top feed position; and

(3) said second portion **53** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a top feed position.

20. The process according to claim 12 wherein

(1) said condensed stream **44, 44a** is divided into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said first portion **52** is supplied to said contacting and separating device **27** at said top feed position; and

(3) said second portion **53** is supplied to said distillation column **20** at a top feed position.

21. In an apparatus for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane,

C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas

fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C_2 components, C_3 components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C_3 components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in said apparatus there being

- (a) a first cooling means **10** to cool said gas **31** under pressure connected to provide a cooled stream **31a** under pressure;
 - (b) a first expansion means **17** connected to receive at least a portion of said cooled stream under pressure and to expand it to a lower pressure, whereby said stream is a further cooled stream; and
 - (c) a distillation column **20** connected to receive said further cooled stream, said distillation column being adapted to separate said further cooled stream into an overhead vapor stream **38** and said relatively less volatile fraction **41**;
- characterized in that said apparatus includes
- (1) dividing means connected to said first cooling means **10** to receive said cooled stream **31a**, **32** and to divide it into first **34** and second **36** streams;
 - (2) second cooling means **15** connected to said dividing means to receive said first stream **34**, **35** and to cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it **35a**;
 - (3) second expansion means **16** connected to said second cooling means **15** to receive said substantially condensed first stream **35a** and to expand it to said lower pressure **35b**, said second expansion means **16** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply said expanded cooled first stream **35b** to said distillation column **20** at a first mid-column feed position;
 - (4) said first expansion means **17** being connected to said dividing means to receive said second stream **36** and to expand it to said lower pressure **36a**, said first

expansion means **17** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply said expanded second stream **36a** to said distillation column **20** at a second mid-column feed position;

(5) vapor withdrawing means connected to said distillation column **20** to receive a vapor distillation stream **54** from a region of said distillation column **20** above said expanded second stream **36a**;

(6) heat exchange means **22** connected to said vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**;

(7) separating means **23** connected to said heat exchange means **22** to receive said partially condensed distillation stream **42a** and separate it, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**, said separating means **23** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44, 44a** to said distillation column **20** at a top feed position;

(8) said distillation column **20** being further connected to said heat exchange means **22** to direct at least a portion of said overhead vapor stream **38** separated therein into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heat said overhead vapor stream **38**, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (6), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(9) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52, 35b, 36a** to said distillation column **20** to maintain the overhead temperature of said distillation column **20** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

22. In an apparatus for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in said apparatus there being

- (a) a first cooling means **10** to cool said gas **31** under pressure connected to provide a cooled stream **31a** under pressure;
- (b) a first expansion means **17** connected to receive at least a portion of said cooled stream under pressure and to expand it to a lower pressure, whereby said stream is a further cooled stream; and
- (c) a distillation column **20** connected to receive said further cooled stream, said distillation column being adapted to separate said further cooled stream into an overhead vapor stream **38** and said relatively less volatile fraction **41**;

characterized in that said apparatus includes

- (1) said first cooling means **10** being adapted to cool said feed gas **31** under pressure sufficiently to partially condense it **31a**;
- (2) first separating means **11** connected to said first cooling means **10** to receive said partially condensed feed **31a** and to separate it into a vapor stream **32** and at least one liquid stream **33**;
- (3) dividing means connected to said first separating means **11** to receive said vapor stream **32** and to divide it into first **34** and second **36** streams;
- (4) second cooling means **15** connected to said dividing means to receive said first stream **34**, **35** and to cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it **35a**;

(5) second expansion means **16** connected to said second cooling means **15** to receive said substantially condensed first stream **35a** and to expand it to said lower pressure **35b**, said second expansion means **16** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply said expanded cooled first stream **35b** to said distillation column **20** at a first mid-column feed position;

(6) said first expansion means **17** being connected to said dividing means to receive said second stream **36** and to expand it to said lower pressure **36a**, said first expansion means **17** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply said expanded second stream **36a** to said distillation column **20** at a second mid-column feed position;

(7) third expansion means **12** connected to said first separating means **11** to receive at least a portion **37** of said at least one liquid stream **33** and to expand it to said lower pressure **37a**, said third expansion means **12** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply said expanded liquid stream **37a** to said distillation column **20** at a third mid-column feed position;

(8) vapor withdrawing means connected to said distillation column **20** to receive a vapor distillation stream **54** from a region of said distillation column **20** above said expanded second stream **36a**;

(9) heat exchange means **22** connected to said vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54**, **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**;

(10) second separating means **23** connected to said heat exchange means **22** to receive said partially condensed distillation stream **42a** and separate it, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**, said second separating means **23**

being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44, 44a** to said distillation column **20** at a top feed position;

(11) said distillation column **20** being further connected to said heat exchange means **22** to direct at least a portion of said overhead vapor stream **38** separated therein into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heat said overhead vapor stream **38**, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (9), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(12) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52, 35b, 36a** to said distillation column **20** to maintain the overhead temperature of said distillation column **20** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

23. In an apparatus for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in said apparatus there being

(a) a first cooling means **10** to cool said gas **31** under pressure connected to provide a cooled stream **31a** under pressure;

(b) a first expansion means **17** connected to receive at least a portion of said cooled stream under pressure and to expand it to a lower pressure, whereby said stream is a further cooled stream; and

(c) a distillation column **20** connected to receive said further cooled stream, said distillation column being adapted to separate said further cooled stream into an overhead vapor stream **38** and said relatively less volatile fraction **41**;

characterized in that said apparatus includes

(1) said first cooling means **10** being adapted to cool said feed gas **31** under pressure sufficiently to partially condense it **31a**;

(2) first separating means **11** connected to said first cooling means **10** to receive said partially condensed feed **31a** and to separate it into a vapor stream **32** and at least one liquid stream **33**;

(3) dividing means connected to said first separating means **11** to receive said vapor stream **32** and to divide it into first **34** and second **36** streams;

(4) combining means connected to said dividing means and said first separating means **11** to receive said first stream **34** and at least a portion **46** of said at least one liquid stream **33** and form a combined stream **35**;

(5) second cooling means **15** connected to said combining means to receive said combined stream **35** and to cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it **35a**;

(6) second expansion means **16** connected to said second cooling means **15** to receive said substantially condensed combined stream **35a** and to expand it to said lower pressure **35b**, said second expansion means **16** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply said expanded cooled combined stream **35b** to said distillation column **20** at a first mid-column feed position;

(7) said first expansion means **17** being connected to said dividing means to receive said second stream **36** and to expand it to said lower pressure **36a**, said first

expansion means **17** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply said expanded second stream **36a** to said distillation column **20** at a second mid-column feed position;

(8) third expansion means **12** being connected to said first separating means **11** to receive any remaining portion **37** of said at least one liquid stream **33** and to expand it to said lower pressure **37a**, said third expansion means **12** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply said expanded liquid stream **37a** to said distillation column **20** at a third mid-column feed position;

(9) vapor withdrawing means connected to said distillation column **20** to receive a vapor distillation stream **54** from a region of said distillation column **20** above said expanded second stream **36a**;

(10) heat exchange means **22** connected to said vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**;

(11) second separating means **23** connected to said heat exchange means **22** to receive said partially condensed distillation stream **42a** and separate it, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**, said second separating means **23** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44, 44a** to said distillation column **20** at a top feed position;

(12) said distillation column **20** being further connected to said heat exchange means **22** to direct at least a portion of said overhead vapor stream **38** separated therein into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heat said overhead vapor stream **38**, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (10), and thereafter

discharging at least a portion of said heated overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(13) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52**, **35b**, **36a** to said distillation column **20** to maintain the overhead temperature of said distillation column **20** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

24. In an apparatus for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in said apparatus there being

(a) a first cooling means **10** to cool said gas **31** under pressure connected to provide a cooled stream **31a** under pressure;

(b) a first expansion means **17** connected to receive at least a portion of said cooled stream under pressure and to expand it to a lower pressure, whereby said stream is a further cooled stream; and

(c) a distillation column **20** connected to receive said further cooled stream, said distillation column being adapted to separate said further cooled stream into a first overhead vapor stream **50** and said relatively less volatile fraction **41**;

characterized in that said apparatus includes

(1) dividing means connected to said first cooling means **10** to receive said cooled stream **31a**, **32** and to divide it into first **34** and second **36** streams;

(2) second cooling means **15** connected to said dividing means to receive said first stream **34, 35** and to cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it **35a**;

(3) second expansion means **16** connected to said second cooling means **15** to receive said substantially condensed first stream **35a** and to expand it to said lower pressure **35b**, said second expansion means **16** being further connected to a contacting and separating means **27** to supply said expanded cooled first stream **35b** to said contacting and separating means **27** at a mid-column feed position, said contacting and separating means **27** being adapted to produce a second overhead vapor stream **38** and a bottom liquid stream **47**;

(4) said first expansion means **17** being connected to said dividing means to receive said second stream **36** and to expand it to said lower pressure **36a**, said first expansion means **17** being further connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to supply said expanded second stream **36a** to said contacting and separating means **27** at a first lower column feed position;

(5) said distillation column **20** being connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to receive at least a portion **48** of said bottom liquid stream **47, 47a**;

(6) said contacting and separating means **27** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to receive at least a portion **51** of said first overhead vapor stream **50** at a second lower column feed position;

(7) vapor withdrawing means connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to receive a vapor distillation stream **54** from a region of said contacting and separating device above said expanded second stream **36a**;

(8) heat exchange means **22** connected to said vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**;

(9) separating means **23** connected to said heat exchange means **22** to receive said partially condensed distillation stream **42a** and separate it, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**, said separating means **23** being further connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to supply at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44, 44a** to said contacting and separating means **27** at a top feed position;

(10) said contacting and separating means **27** being further connected to said heat exchange means **22** to direct at least a portion of said second overhead vapor stream **38** separated therein into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heat said second overhead vapor stream **38**, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (8), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated second overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(11) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52, 35b, 36a** to said contacting and separating means **27** to maintain the overhead temperature of said contacting and separating means **27** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

25. In an apparatus for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in said apparatus there being

- (a) a first cooling means **10** to cool said gas **31** under pressure connected to provide a cooled stream **31a** under pressure;
 - (b) a first expansion means **17** connected to receive at least a portion of said cooled stream under pressure and to expand it to a lower pressure, whereby said stream is a further cooled stream; and
 - (c) a distillation column **20** connected to receive said further cooled stream, said distillation column being adapted to separate said further cooled stream into a first overhead vapor stream **50** and said relatively less volatile fraction **41**;
- characterized in that said apparatus includes
- (1) said first cooling means **10** being adapted to cool said feed gas **31** under pressure sufficiently to partially condense it **31a**;
 - (2) first separating means **11** connected to said first cooling means **10** to receive said partially condensed feed **31a** and to separate it into a vapor stream **32** and at least one liquid stream **33**;
 - (3) dividing means connected to said first separating means **11** to receive said vapor stream **32** and to divide it into first **34** and second **36** streams;
 - (4) second cooling means **15** connected to said dividing means to receive said first stream **34**, **35** and to cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it **35a**;
 - (5) second expansion means **16** connected to said second cooling means **15** to receive said substantially condensed first stream **35a** and to expand it to said lower pressure **35b**, said second expansion means **16** being further connected to a contacting and separating means **27** to supply said expanded cooled first stream **35b** to said contacting and

separating means **27** at a mid-column feed position, said contacting and separating means **27** being adapted to produce a second overhead vapor stream **38** and a bottom liquid stream **47**;

(6) said first expansion means **17** being connected to said dividing means to receive said second stream **36** and to expand it to said lower pressure **36a**, said first expansion means **17** being further connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to supply said expanded second stream **36a** to said contacting and separating means **27** at a first lower column feed position;

(7) third expansion means **12** connected to said first separating means **11** to receive at least a portion **37** of said at least one liquid stream **33** and to expand it to said lower pressure **37a**, said third expansion means **12** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply said expanded liquid stream **37a** to said distillation column **20** at a mid-column feed position;

(8) said distillation column **20** being connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to receive at least a portion **48** of said bottom liquid stream **47**, **47a**;

(9) said contacting and separating means **27** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to receive at least a portion **51** of said first overhead vapor stream **50** at a second lower column feed position;

(10) vapor withdrawing means connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to receive a vapor distillation stream **54** from a region of said contacting and separating device **27** above said expanded second stream **36a**;

(11) heat exchange means **22** connected to said vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54**, **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**;

(12) second separating means **23** connected to said heat exchange means **22** to receive said partially condensed distillation stream **42a** and separate it, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**, said second separating means **23** being further connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to supply at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44, 44a** to said contacting and separating means **27** at a top feed position;

(13) said contacting and separating means **27** being further connected to said heat exchange means **22** to direct at least a portion of said second overhead vapor stream **38** separated therein into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heat said second overhead vapor stream **38**, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (11), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated second overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(14) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52, 35b, 36a** to said contacting and separating means **27** to maintain the overhead temperature of said contacting and separating means **27** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

26. In an apparatus for the separation of a gas stream **31** containing methane, C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components into a volatile residue gas fraction **45e** and a relatively less volatile fraction **41** containing a major portion of said C₂ components, C₃ components, and heavier hydrocarbon components or said C₃ components and heavier hydrocarbon components, in said apparatus there being

(a) a first cooling means **10** to cool said gas **31** under pressure connected to provide a cooled stream **31a** under pressure;

(b) a first expansion means **17** connected to receive at least a portion of said cooled stream under pressure and to expand it to a lower pressure, whereby said stream is a further cooled stream; and

(c) a distillation column **20** connected to receive said further cooled stream, said distillation column being adapted to separate said further cooled stream into a first overhead vapor stream **50** and said relatively less volatile fraction **41**;

characterized in that said apparatus includes

(1) said first cooling means **10** being adapted to cool said feed gas **31** under pressure sufficiently to partially condense it **31a**;

(2) first separating means **11** connected to said first cooling means **10** to receive said partially condensed feed **31a** and to separate it into a vapor stream **32** and at least one liquid stream **33**;

(3) dividing means connected to said first separating means **11** to receive said vapor stream **32** and to divide it into first **34** and second **36** streams;

(4) combining means connected to said dividing means and said first separating means **11** to receive said first stream **34** and at least a portion **46** of said at least one liquid stream **33** and form a combined stream **35**;

(5) second cooling means **15** connected to said combining means to receive said combined stream **35** and to cool it sufficiently to substantially condense it **35a**;

(6) second expansion means **16** connected to said second cooling means **15** to receive said substantially condensed combined stream **35a** and to expand it to said lower pressure **35b**, said second expansion means **16** being further connected to a contacting and separating means **27** to supply said expanded cooled combined stream **35b** to said contacting and

separating means **27** at a mid-column feed position, said contacting and separating means **27** being adapted to produce a second overhead vapor stream **38** and a bottom liquid stream **47**;

(7) said first expansion means **17** being connected to said dividing means to receive said second stream **36** and to expand it to said lower pressure **36a**, said first expansion means **17** being further connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to supply said expanded second stream **36a** to said contacting and separating means **27** at a first lower column feed position;

(8) third expansion means **12** connected to said first separating means **11** to receive any remaining portion **37** of said at least one liquid stream **33** and to expand it to said lower pressure **37a**, said third expansion means **12** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to supply said expanded liquid stream **37a** to said distillation column **20** at a mid-column feed position;

(9) said distillation column **20** being connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to receive at least a portion **48** of said bottom liquid stream **47**, **47a**;

(10) said contacting and separating means **27** being further connected to said distillation column **20** to receive at least a portion **51** of said first overhead vapor stream **50** at a second lower column feed position;

(11) vapor withdrawing means connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to receive a vapor distillation stream **54** from a region of said contacting and separating device **27** above said expanded second stream **36a**;

(12) heat exchange means **22** connected to said vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54**, **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**;

(13) second separating means **23** connected to said heat exchange means **22** to receive said partially condensed distillation stream **42a** and separate it, thereby forming a residual vapor stream **43** and a condensed stream **44**, said second separating means **23** being further connected to said contacting and separating means **27** to supply at least a portion **52** of said condensed stream **44, 44a** to said contacting and separating means **27** at a top feed position;

(14) said contacting and separating means **27** being further connected to said heat exchange means **22** to direct at least a portion of said second overhead vapor stream **38** separated therein into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42** and heat said second overhead vapor stream, thereby to supply at least a portion of the cooling **22** of step (12), and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated second overhead vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45e**; and

(15) control means adapted to regulate the quantities and temperatures of said feed streams **52, 35b, 36a** to said contacting and separating means **27** to maintain the overhead temperature of said contacting and separating means **27** at a temperature whereby the major portions of the components in said relatively less volatile fraction **41** are recovered.

27. The apparatus according to claim 21 wherein

(1) a combining means is connected to said distillation column **20** and said separating means **23** to receive said overhead vapor stream **38** and said residual vapor stream **43** and form a combined vapor stream **45**; and

(2) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to receive said combined vapor stream **45** from said combining means and direct it into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, thereby heating said combined vapor stream **45** and supplying at

least a portion of said cooling **22** of said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated combined vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45f**.

28. The apparatus according to claim 22 wherein

(1) a combining means is connected to said distillation column **20** and said second separating means **23** to receive said overhead vapor stream **38** and said residual vapor stream **43** and form a combined vapor stream **45**; and

(2) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to receive said combined vapor stream **45** from said combining means and direct it into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, thereby heating said combined vapor stream **45** and supplying at least a portion of said cooling **22** of said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated combined vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45f**.

29. The apparatus according to claim 23 wherein

(1) a second combining means is connected to said distillation column **20** and said second separating means **23** to receive said overhead vapor stream **38** and said residual vapor stream **43** and form a combined vapor stream **45**; and

(2) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to receive said combined vapor stream **45** from said second combining means and direct it into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, thereby heating said combined vapor stream **45** and supplying at least a portion of said cooling **22** of said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated combined vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45f**.

30. The apparatus according to claim 24 wherein

(1) a combining means is connected to said contacting and separating means **27** and said separating means **23** to receive said second overhead vapor stream **38** and said residual vapor stream **43** and form a combined vapor stream **45**; and

(2) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to receive said combined vapor stream **45** from said combining means and direct it into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, thereby heating said combined vapor stream **45** and supplying at least a portion of said cooling **22** of said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated combined vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45f**.

31. The apparatus according to claim 25 wherein

(1) a combining means is connected to said contacting and separating means **27** and said second separating means **23** to receive said second overhead vapor stream **38** and said residual vapor stream **43** and form a combined vapor stream **45**; and

(2) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to receive said combined vapor stream **45** from said combining means and direct it into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, thereby heating said combined vapor stream **45** and supplying at least a portion of said cooling **22** of said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated combined vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45f**.

32. The apparatus according to claim 26 wherein

(1) a second combining means is connected to said contacting and separating means **27** and said second separating means **23** to receive said second overhead vapor stream **38** and said residual vapor stream **43** and form a combined vapor stream **45**; and

(2) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to receive said combined vapor stream **45** from said second combining means and direct it into heat exchange relation with said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, thereby heating said combined vapor stream **45** and supplying at least a portion of said cooling **22** of said vapor distillation stream **54, 42**, and thereafter discharging at least a portion of said heated combined vapor stream as said volatile residue gas fraction **45f**.

33. The apparatus according to claim 21 wherein

(1) a second vapor withdrawing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive a second vapor distillation stream **55** from a region of said distillation column **20** below said expanded second stream **36a**;

(2) a combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said second vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(3) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(4) said separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

34. The apparatus according to claim 22 wherein

(1) a second vapor withdrawing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive a second vapor distillation stream **55** from a region of said distillation column **20** below said expanded second stream **36a**;

(2) a combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said second vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(3) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(4) said second separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

35. The apparatus according to claim 23 wherein

(1) a second vapor withdrawing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive a second vapor distillation stream **55** from a region of said distillation column **20** below said expanded second stream **36a**;

(2) a second combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said second vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(3) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said second combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(4) said second separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

36. The apparatus according to claim 27 wherein

(1) a second vapor withdrawing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive a second vapor distillation stream **55** from a region of said distillation column **20** below said expanded second stream **36a**;

(2) a second combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said second vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(3) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said second combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(4) said separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

37. The apparatus according to claim 28 wherein

(1) a second vapor withdrawing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive a second vapor distillation stream **55** from a region of said distillation column **20** below said expanded second stream **36a**;

(2) a second combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said second vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(3) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said second combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(4) said second separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

38. The apparatus according to claim 28 wherein

(1) a second vapor withdrawing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive a second vapor distillation stream **55** from a region of said distillation column **20** below said expanded second stream **36a**;

(2) a second combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said second vapor withdrawing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(3) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said third combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(4) said second separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

39. The apparatus according to claim 24 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive said first overhead vapor stream **50** and divide it into a second vapor distillation stream **55** and a third vapor distillation stream **51**;

(2) said contacting and separating device **27** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said third distillation vapor stream **51** at said second lower column feed position;

(3) a combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said dividing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(4) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(5) said separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

40. The apparatus according to claim 25 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive said first overhead vapor stream **50** and divide it into a second vapor distillation stream **55** and a third vapor distillation stream **51**;

(2) said contacting and separating device **27** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said third distillation vapor stream **51** at said second lower column feed position;

(3) a combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said dividing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(4) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(5) said second separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

41. The apparatus according to claim 26 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive said first overhead vapor stream **50** and divide it into a second vapor distillation stream **55** and a third vapor distillation stream **51**;

(2) said contacting and separating device **27** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said third distillation vapor stream **51** at said second lower column feed position;

(3) a second combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said dividing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(4) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said second combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(5) said second separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

42. The apparatus according to claim 30 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive said first overhead vapor stream **50** and divide it into a second vapor distillation stream **55** and a third vapor distillation stream **51**;

(2) said contacting and separating device **27** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said third distillation vapor stream **51** at said second lower column feed position;

(3) a second combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said dividing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(4) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said second combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(5) said separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

43. The apparatus according to claim 31 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive said first overhead vapor stream **50** and divide it into a second vapor distillation stream **55** and a third vapor distillation stream **51**;

(2) said contacting and separating device **27** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said third distillation vapor stream **51** at said second lower column feed position;

(3) a second combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said dividing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(4) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said second combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(5) said second separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

44. The apparatus according to claim 32 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said distillation column **20** to receive said first overhead vapor stream **50** and divide it into a second vapor distillation stream **55** and a third vapor distillation stream **51**;

(2) said contacting and separating device **27** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said third distillation vapor stream **51** at said second lower column feed position;

(3) a third combining means is connected to said vapor withdrawing means and said dividing means to receive said vapor distillation stream **54** and said second vapor distillation stream **55** and form a combined distillation stream **42**;

(4) said heat exchange means **22** is adapted to be connected to said third combining means to receive said combined distillation stream **42** and cool it sufficiently to condense at least a part of it **42a**; and

(5) said second separating means **23** is adapted to receive said partially condensed combined distillation stream **42a** from said heat exchange means **22** and separate it, thereby forming said residual vapor stream **43** and said condensed stream **44**.

45. The apparatus according to claim 21 or 27 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said separating means **23** to receive said condensed stream **44**, **44a** and divide it into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said distillation column **20** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said first portion **52** at said top feed position; and

(3) said distillation column **20** is further adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said second portion **53** at a mid-column feed position below that of said expanded second stream **36a**.

46. The apparatus according to claim 22, 23, 28, or 29 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said second separating means **23** to receive said condensed stream **44**, **44a** and divide it into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said distillation column **20** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said first portion **52** at said top feed position; and

(3) said distillation column **20** is further adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said second portion **53** at a mid-column feed position below that of said expanded second stream **36a**.

47. The apparatus according to claim 33 or 36 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said separating means **23** to receive said condensed stream **44, 44a** and divide it into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said distillation column **20** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said first portion **52** at said top feed position; and

(3) said distillation column **20** is further adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said second portion **53** at a mid-column feed position, said mid-column feed position being in substantially the same region wherein said second vapor distillation stream **55** is withdrawn.

48. The apparatus according to claim 34, 35, 37, or 38 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said second separating means **23** to receive said condensed stream **44, 44a** and divide it into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said distillation column **20** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said first portion **52** at said top feed position; and

(3) said distillation column **20** is further adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said second portion **53** at a mid-column feed position, said mid-column feed position being in substantially the same region wherein said second vapor distillation stream **55** is withdrawn.

49. The apparatus according to claim 24 or 30 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said separating means **23** to receive said condensed stream **44, 44a** and divide it into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said contacting and separating means **27** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said first portion **52** at said top feed position; and

(3) said distillation column **20** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said second portion **53** at a top feed position.

50. The apparatus according to claim 25, 26, 31, or 32 wherein

(1) a second dividing means is connected to said second separating means **23** to receive said condensed stream **44, 44a** and divide it into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said contacting and separating means **27** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said first portion **52** at said top feed position; and

(3) said distillation column **20** is adapted to be connected to said second dividing means to receive said second portion **53** at a top feed position.

51. The apparatus according to claim 39 or 42 wherein

(1) a third dividing means is connected to said separating means **23** to receive said condensed stream **44, 44a** and divide it into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said contacting and separating means **27** is adapted to be connected to said third dividing means to receive said first portion **52** at said top feed position; and

(3) said distillation column **20** is adapted to be connected to said third dividing means to receive said second portion **53** at a top feed position.

52. The apparatus according to claim 40, 41, 43, or 44 wherein

(1) a third dividing means is connected to said second separating means **23** to receive said condensed stream **44, 44a** and divide it into at least a first portion **52** and a second portion **53**;

(2) said contacting and separating means **27** is adapted to be connected to said third dividing means to receive said first portion **52** at said top feed position; and

(3) said distillation column **20** is adapted to be connected to said third dividing means to receive said second portion **53** at a top feed position.

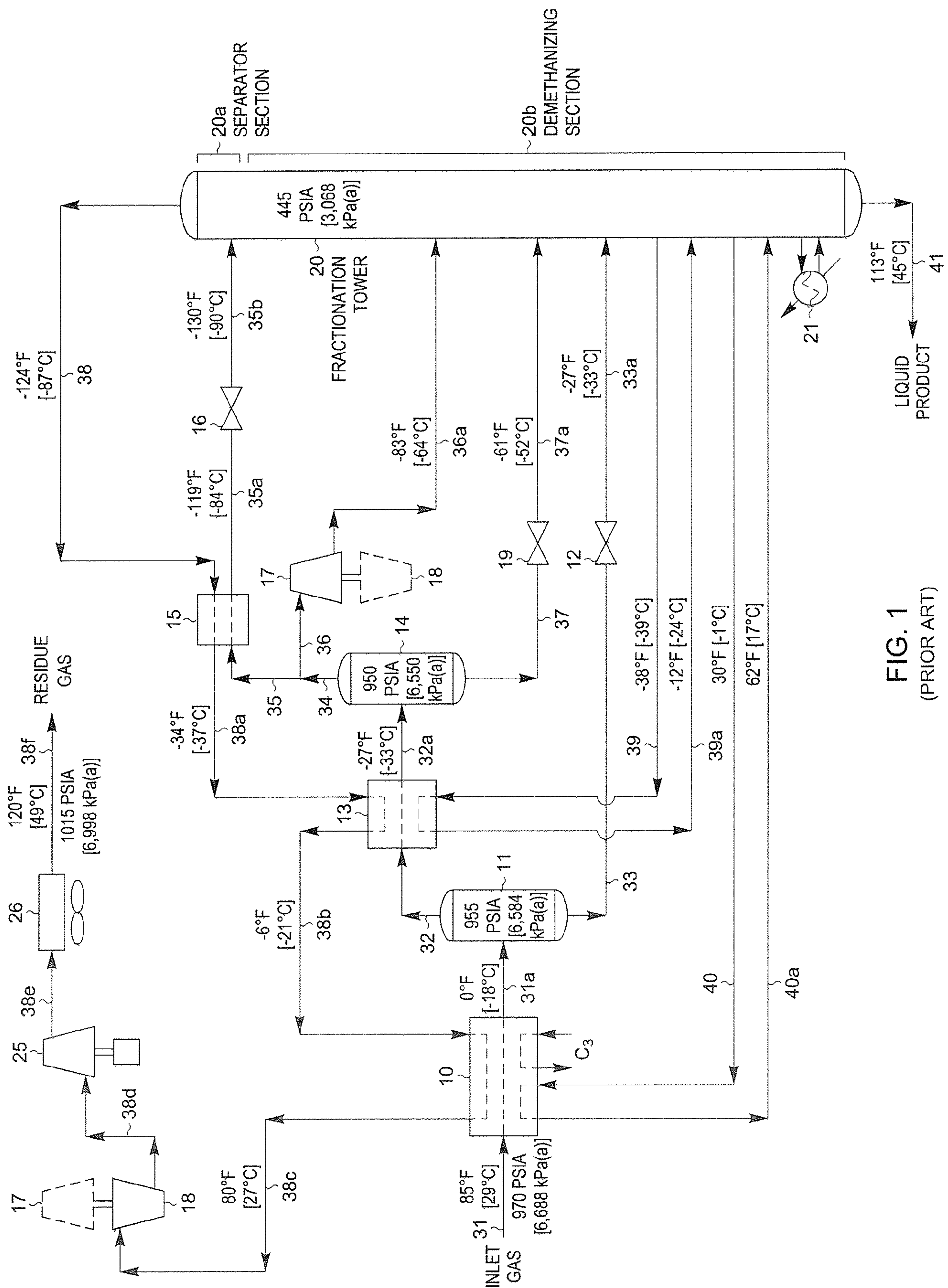
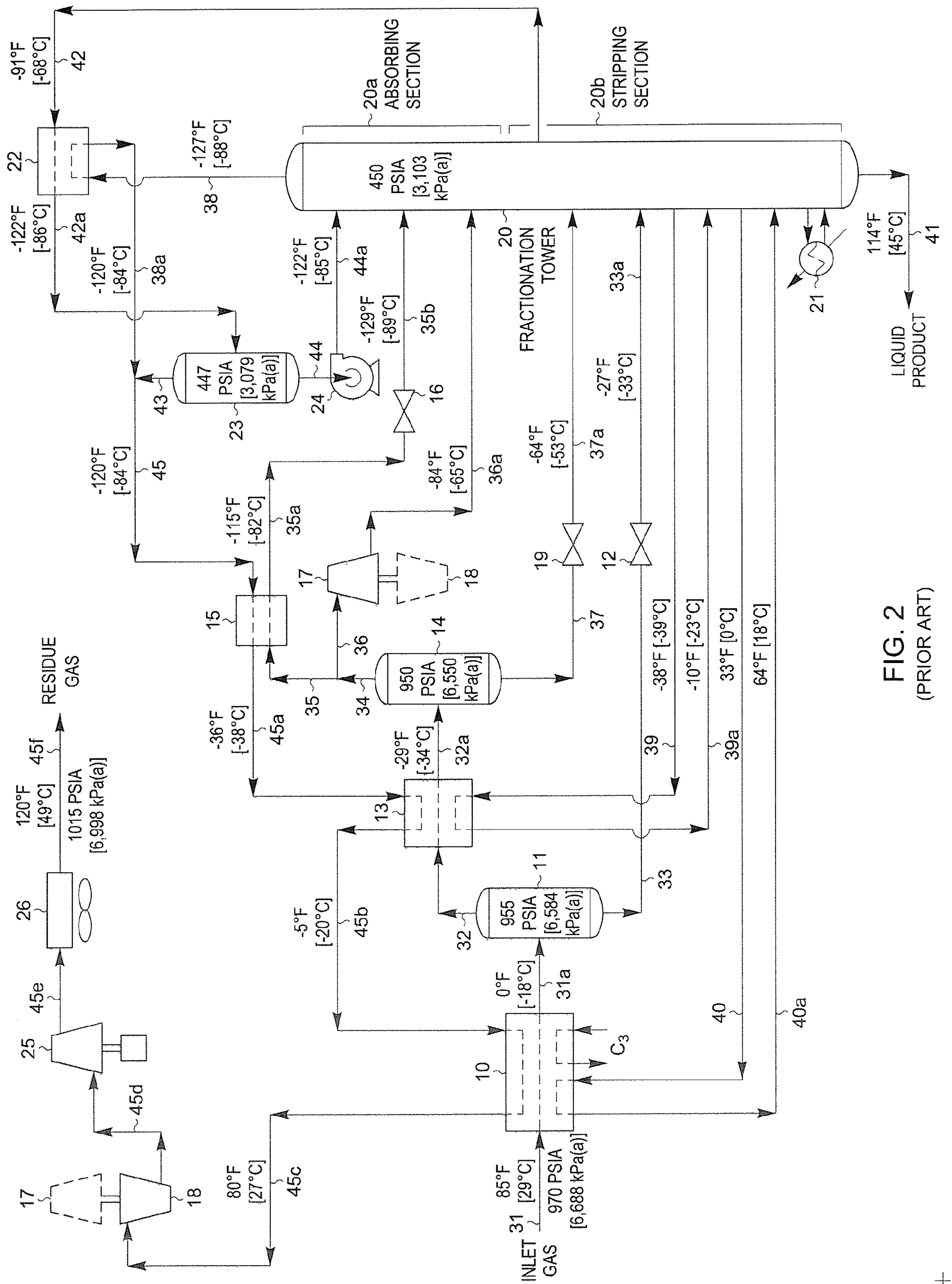


FIG. 1
(PRIOR ART)

FIG. 2
(PRIOR ART)

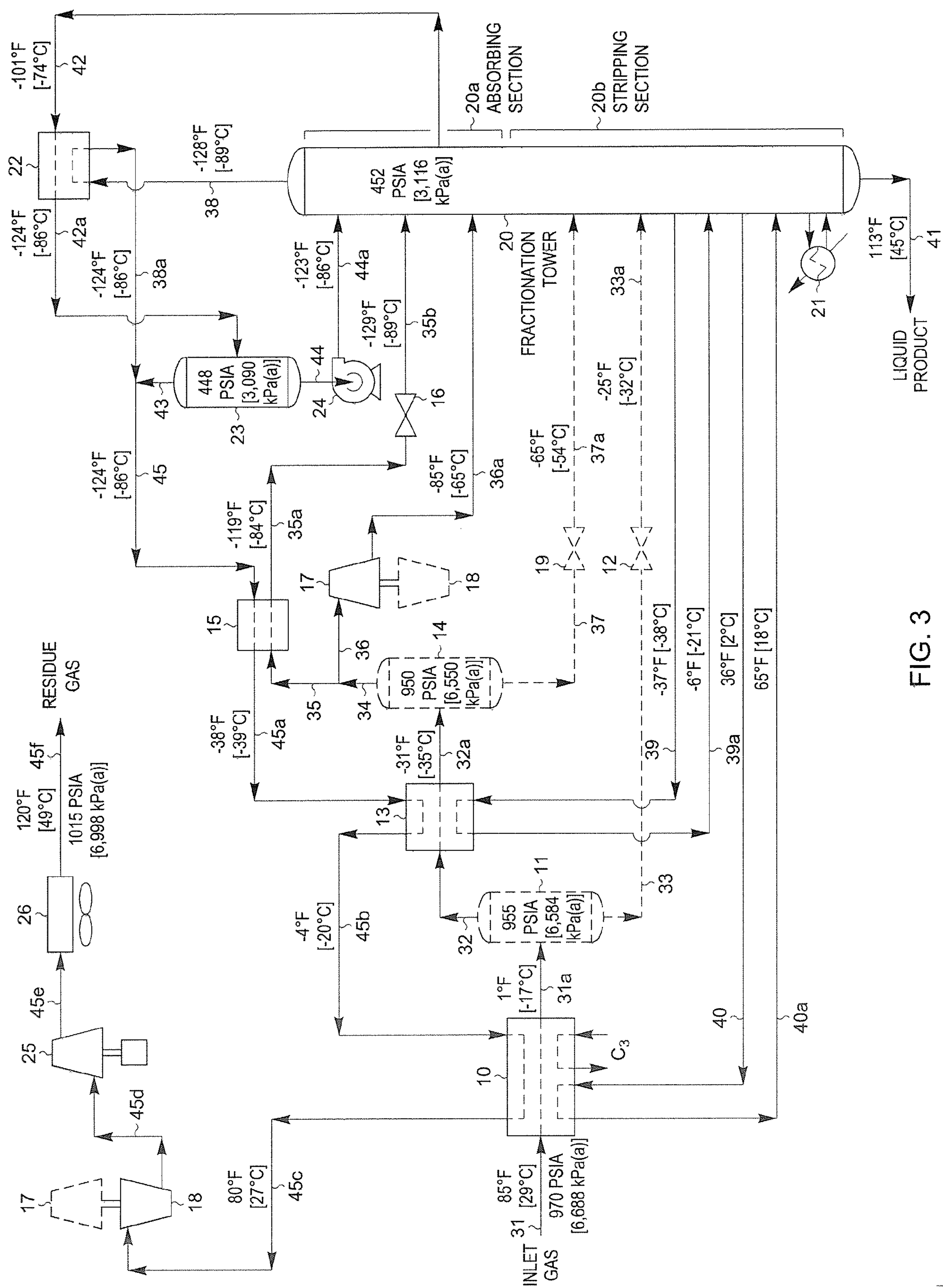


FIG. 3

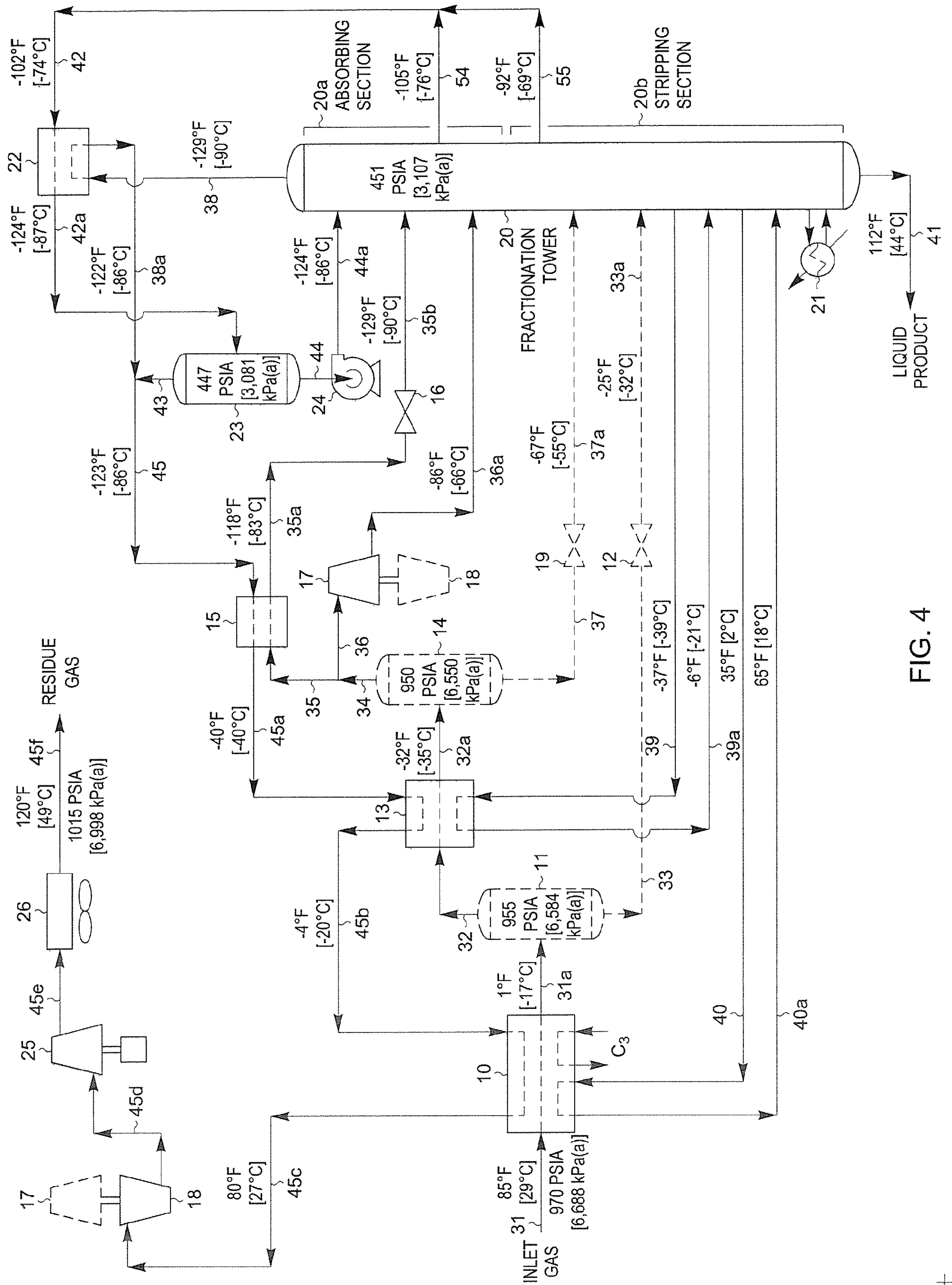


FIG. 4

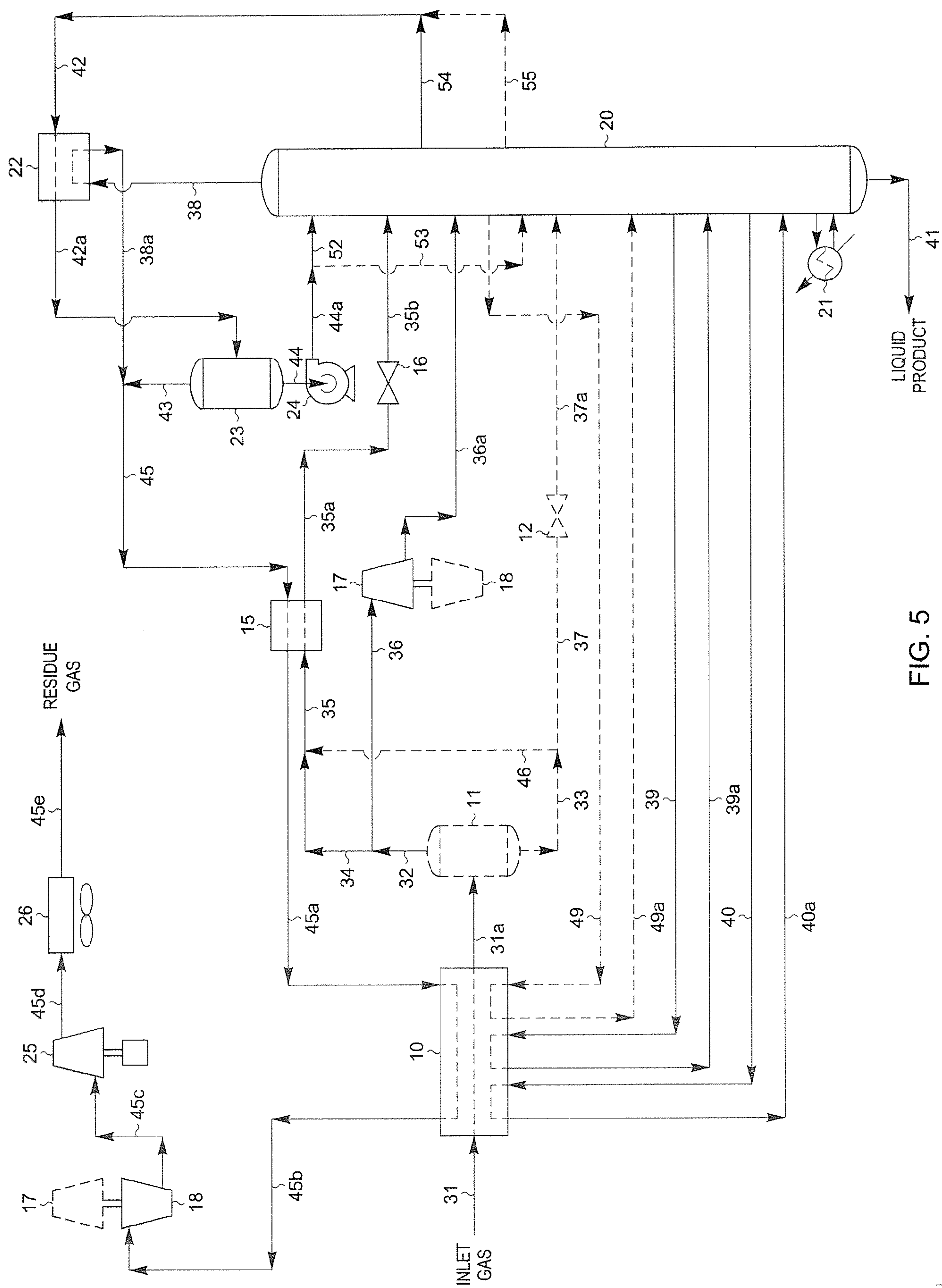


FIG. 5

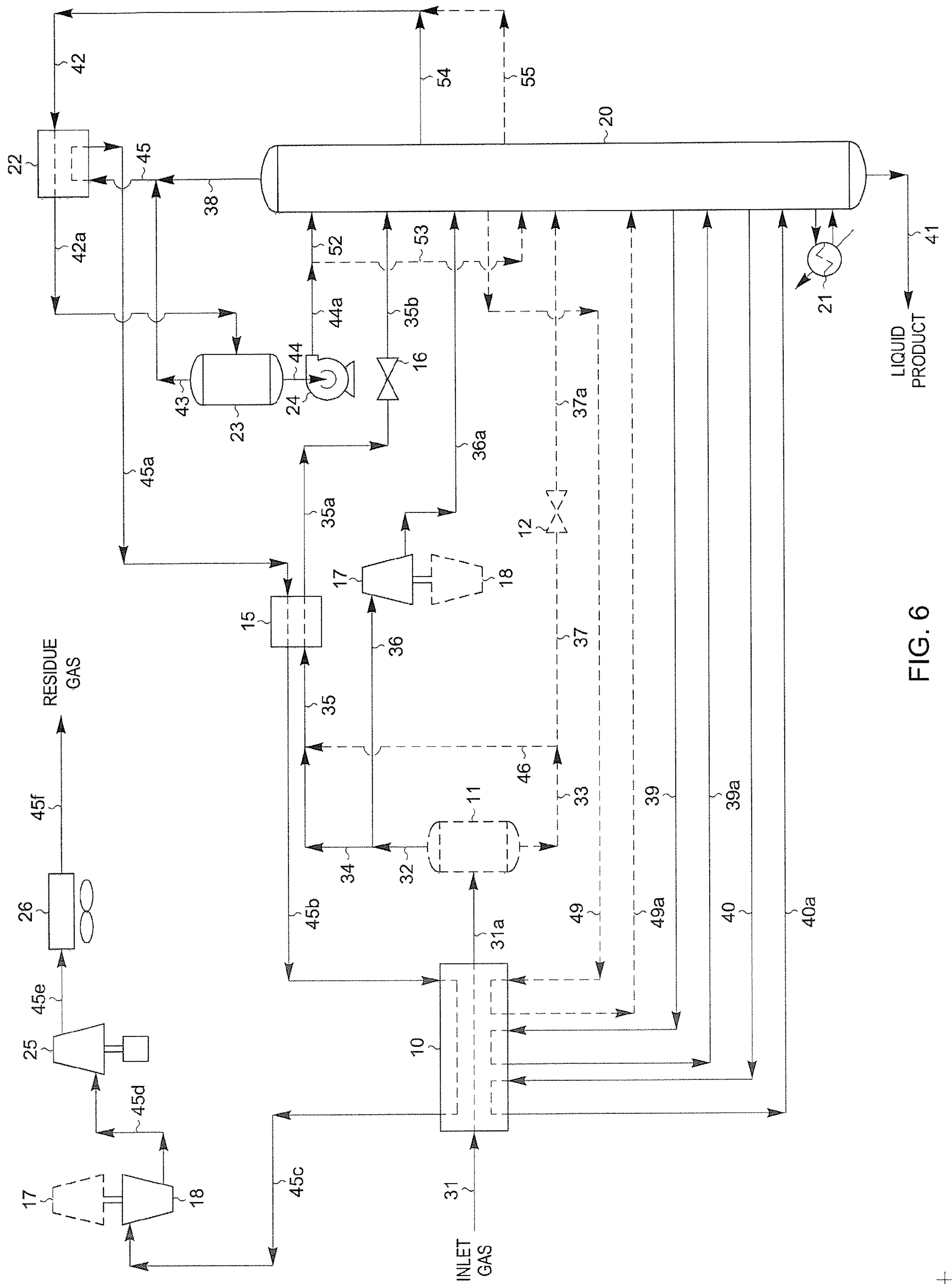


FIG. 6

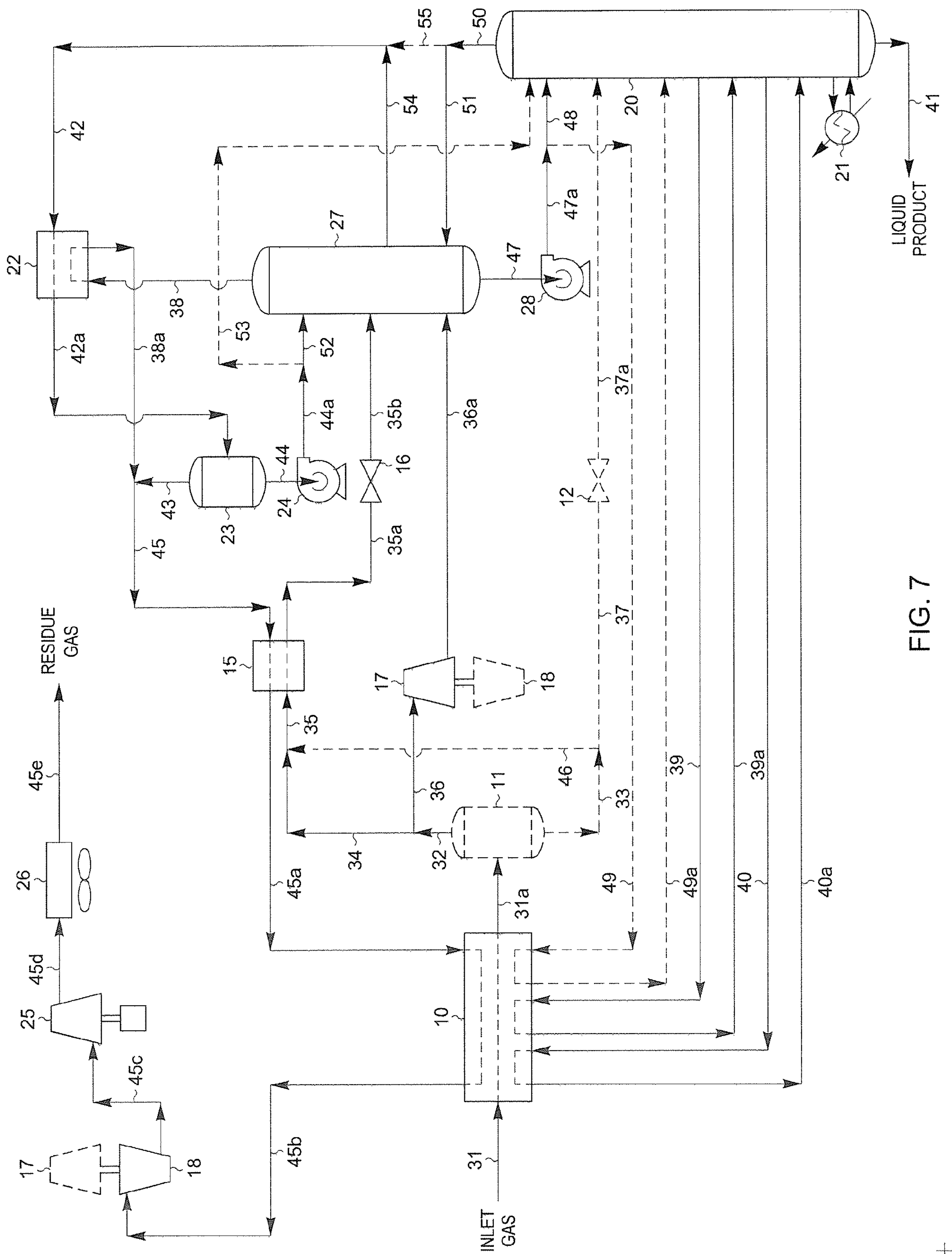


FIG. 7

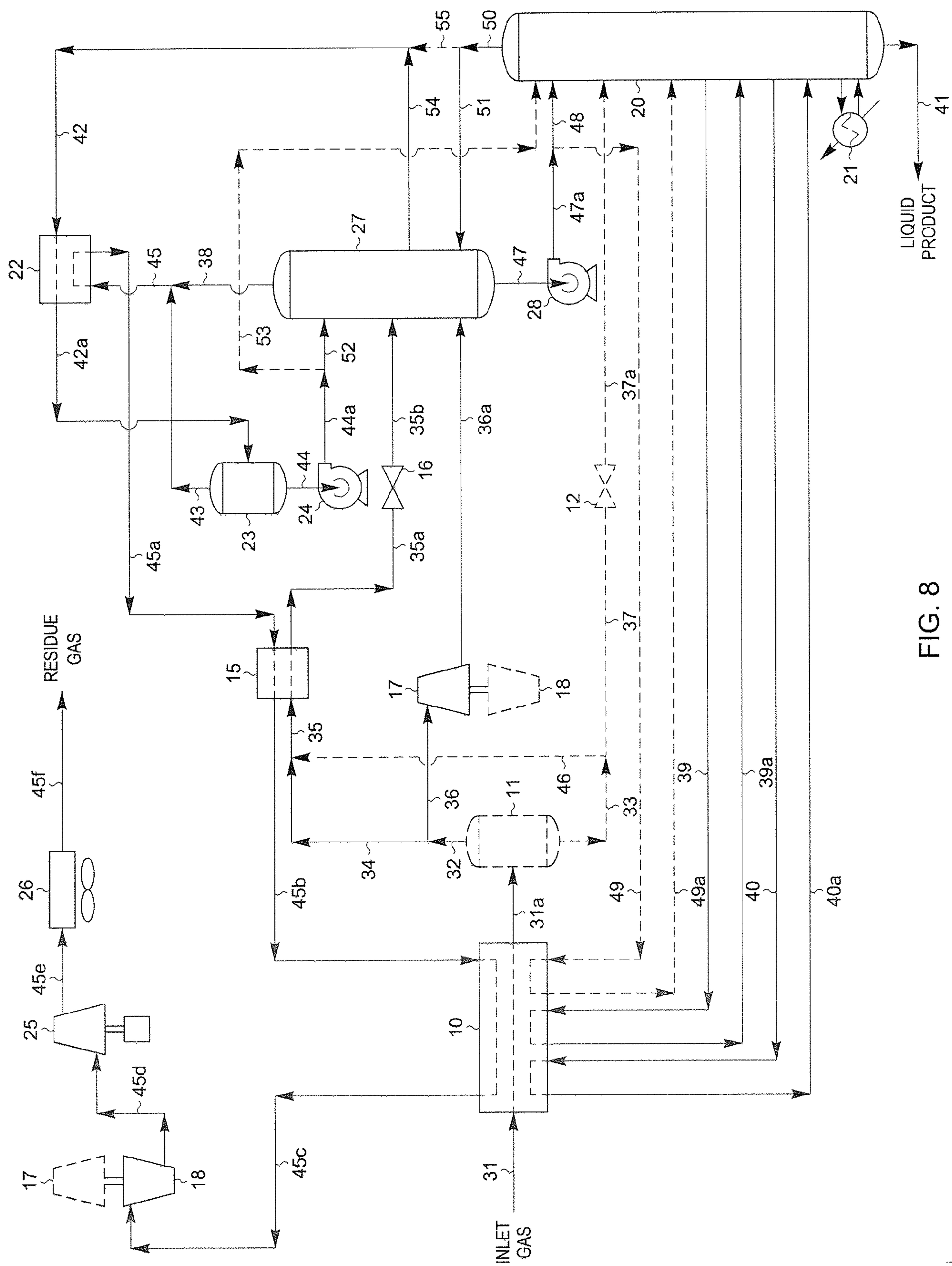


FIG. 8

