The Fireman's Lament was sent to me by MIS Bob Richardson, and the words are attributed to "A. Fireman" on the text I have. There is no tune listed.

The Fireman's Lament

I put on my rags and I pack my grip, Called for another East-end trip. The hogger, he says, "Mate, this is cruel — Another tank of that Geasley 'Brule'."

On goes the blower, I bale in a ton, And back on to a drag of forty and one. Along comes the con, with a face that is sore, "We're a hundred tons light, but we'll pick up some more. And say, the head-end shack wants to stay back and eat; Get the fire-boy to throw the switch for that meat."

So I shovel and sweat, I swear and I shake, And poke till the prongs are bent on the rake. My pal on my right side sits, like a hen on its nest, And says: "My boy, are you doing your best? Shut off the guns, don't get her too low, You're 20 pounds shy and the headlight won't go."

So it's shovel and shake, curse, shovel and rake, And keep it up tho' my back's like to break. They call this dirt fuel and talk conservation, Get rid of it quick, is our only salvation. Our Chairman he says: "Don't grouse and get sore, When the million ton's done, there's a million more."

At the end of the "Sub" our orders completed, Some cars for to spot, but the fuel is depleted, So we back the old mill, on the ingoing track, And pick up my grip, my coat and my hat. And I tell "Old Side Rods" to book me some hay, As I'm going to sleep for the rest of the day.

Home once again to the kiddies and wife — The only pleasure I have in this life. Off come the duds and I roll into bed, When the missus, she says, "Did you wash you head? Get off the pillow and get off it quick!" And I land on the floor with a terrible kick.

It's scrub the old head, and wash it some more, You can hear the "Brule" drop on the floor. Then out of the stillness a terrible howl, Cause I dried my face on the guest's linen towel.

When life work is ended, and they send me to hell, (For I've said some things the pen can't tell.) I will ask the "Good Shepherd" not to be cruel, But to follow me up with a consignment of "Brule", So that there with Old Nick I'll sit and keep cool, For I'm convinced that even stokers in hell can't handle the "Brule".

There is clearly quite a bit of "in-group" language in this song. Don Miller, a song writer and collector from Nova Scotia, had worked on the railroad for a number of years, so I wrote him asking if he'd "decode" some of the technical terms in "The Fireman's Lament". He kindly responded with the following information:

hogger - railroad engineer
geasley brule - a new one to me, but presume it means the cinder dust and soot and smoke.
blower - steam jet in the stack that makes a draft when the engine is idling - something like an exhaust.
bale - shovel
back on to a drag of forty and one - the engine is backing on to his train, which in this case is 41 cars long.
con - conductor
head-end shack - head-end brakeman, who rides in the engine with the engineer and fireman.
throw the switch for that meet (not "meat") - opens the siding to allow an approaching train to pass
(“meet”). Could either open the siding to make the other train wait or to have to wait themselves.

rake – long handle with two metal prongs on the end, used much like a hoe to haul back the ashes, level the coal on the fire or clear some of the ashes and clinkers out of the firebox.

guns – throttle
don’t get her too low – this one is hard to explain.
It relates to a “Johnson bar” that governs the pistons’ strokes. The bar is underneath the engine and shaped like a half moon. It operates much like the gear shift on a car – you start in low, then second, etc., as you gain speed.

you’re 20 pounds shy – 20 pounds of steam too low.
sub – sub-division. Each division is divided into sub-divisions, such as the Halifax division being the Liverpool and Yarmouth sub-divisions.
cars for to spot – a team track or siding where a firm or business has a specified place where they load or unload their cars. It is also referred to as “placing” a car for loading or unloading. After a car has been placed, or spotted, the firm is allowed 48 hours to load or unload same, and if not done a demurrage is charged.

book me some hay – after working so hard they “book rest”, that is, they want to go to sleep. I think six hours is the minimum.

Old Nick – the devil.

It is worth noting the similarities between this song and aspects of “Le Chauffeur de Locomotive”, presented in the Canadian Railroad Songs feature [BULLETIN, 16:2 (April 1982), p. 10]. The hard work, dirt and need for sleep are part of both songs. This suggests that some of the drudgery and hard work that is part of the day-to-day life of a railroad man is common across the country.

A second interesting tidbit was also in the file. This was in the form of a xerox copy of a poem or song entitled “The Engineers”. It was credited to George Gwin, Hanna, Alberta, June 12, 1971.

I asked Don Miller if he had heard of any of the people mentioned in the poem. He indicated that Casey Jones was the only one he recognized.

THE ENGINEERS

Last night as I lay in bed,
Things started going through my head;
Of trainmen and firemen and engineers.
Of some of the names of the men
That run the engines now and then.
They were all good people I would say
All were pretty good men in their way.
Some were fat and others thin
Others short and others slim,
But names are what I want to recall,
Like Casey Jones, Loppy Brooks,
Big Noisy MacDonald who read the books;
Popcorn Johnny and Moccasin Face,
They were engineers that ran a good race.
Old Haggar Ryan with his big “haw-haw”,
There was Sore Toe Eddy and Foxie Grandpaw.
Little Bobbie Stewart and Dick Carr,
Have retired now, but some have gone to that land afar;
So God be with them one and all,
That are waiting for the Call Boy’s call.