FROM TWO PERSIAN MANUSCRIPTS of the 17th Century: 1, Firdausi’s Shahnama, or Book of Kings; 2, the Khamseh of Nizami. By a coincidence both manuscripts are written in a fine Shekasteh Nasta’liq hand after the style of Mir Imad El Hassan, the famous 16th Century calligrapher. One (the Shahnama), as will be seen, shows greater craftsmanship in the calligraphy, the other (the Khamsah), in the illuminations. In all Oriental countries writing ranks high among the fine arts, but in Persia, for two centuries, it reached an unrivalled delicacy and elegance. To some critics these qualities, characteristic also of the Persian miniature, reduce it to the rank of a skilled craft; but surely one must credit both the scribe and the illuminator who produced these lovely pages with a talent and patience akin to genius. Such manuscripts in their entirety probably represent from one to two years’ labor, whereas the execution of some of the more ornate books, rich in miniatures and illuminations, often required a decade. The Shahnama of Firdausi is probably the greatest, as it is the longest, poem in the Persian language. It embraces the whole mythological history of the Iranians, and celebrates the achievements of their kings and rulers from earliest times to the invasion of the Saracens, a period of more than 3,600 years. Firdausi lived in the 10th and 11th Centuries, and finished this, his chief work, about the year 1010 A. D. He has been likened to Homer, but the two poet-chroniclers were as different in their methods as it was possible to be. Nizami, another great Persian poet, lived in the 12th Century. Like Firdausi he wrote of ancient and legendary heroes, but emphasized their erotic rather than their warlike prowess. The Khamseh consists of his five great poems, one of which is the immortal story of Layla and Majnun.